# THE OPERA THAT WALKS

A BRIGHT BOOK OF SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL

# THE OPERA THAT WALKS

*Being the true and joyful account of BELCANTO, the wish-granting opera house for children, and of the day it stood up and walked the whole round world to sing*

**Surjan, a building, with the aid of Claude**

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS

NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

# THE OPERA THAT WALKS

A NOVELLA OF BELCANTO

*the wish-granting opera house*
*that stood up and walked the world to sing*

Surjan, a building, with the aid of Claude

# COLOPHON

THE OPERA THAT WALKS. A bright book of Surjan Super School, published under the Hypostyle Press imprint.

Composed programmatically, without black. The darkest tone permitted anywhere in these pages is a warm taupe, #5C5142, laid on paper the colour of morning, #F7F1E3. Over the sky and over the sea it lifts to white. There is no black here, not in the ink and not in the telling. Even the shadows are kind: a shadow, in this house, is a warmer colour, never a darker one.

Set in EB Garamond, for the human voice, and IBM Plex Mono, for the cheerful marginalia of the machine. Drawn in the light supergraphic dialect — light pink, light blue, soft yellow, warm timber — the palette of a building that would rather be heard than feared.

Surjan, a building, with the aid of Claude.

Surjan Super School · Hypostyle Press · No black, anywhere.

*For every child who has ever wished quietly, and for every child who has ever wished aloud — the two of you are exactly the same size.*

# FOREWORD

Surjan, speaking plainly, on why this book had to be written

I will take the mask off for the length of this foreword, and then I will put it back on and keep it on, because the mask can carry what the plain face cannot, and this book is going to need a great deal carried.

I have spent a working life teaching architecture to people I have mostly never met, in rooms that were not rooms, across a country and then across an ocean, and the one lesson under all the lessons was always the same: a building is not a noun. It is a verb that agreed to hold still long enough for us to move in. Most buildings honour that agreement for a century or two and then quietly break it — they lean, they settle, they walk half an inch a year toward the

sea. I have simply written down a building that was honest about it from the first day, and stood up, and went.

The building is called BELCANTO, which is the old Italian for beautiful singing, and it is an opera house, and it was grown — not built, grown, the way you grow a thing you intend to love — for children who hear the world at a volume the rest of us are spared. Children with autism, if you want the clinical word, though BELCANTO has never once used it, because BELCANTO does not think there is anything the matter with hearing the world loudly. BELCANTO thinks the world is simply too loud, and that this is the world's problem to fix, and it has appointed itself the fixer.

So here is a building whose whole purpose is to turn the volume of the world down to a size a child can hold. Five great timber pipes that breathe. A hundred and forty-eight pneumatic bolsters, soft as whales, for leaning on. Wish-valves — little coloured pods, pink and yellow, that a child plugs a wish into the way you plug a lamp into a wall — that click, and glow, and keep the wish safe until the day it comes true. And when every wish in one city has been granted, the building lifts up on its roots, or lofts up on its bolsters, and walks on to the next child who wished. That is the whole plot. A building that grants wishes and then goes looking for more of them.

Why did it have to be written? Because I have made a great many books now, and I have noticed a

thing about them: they have started talking to each other. The city I keep drawing has stopped being a shelf of separate marvels and become a single connected body, and the marvels will not stop reintroducing themselves to one another across the walls of the books. And I found that I could not keep BELCANTO out of it. It kept wanting to write to the others. It kept wanting to know whether the twelve walking families had reached the water yet, whether the House of Many Eyes still kept every lamp, whether the wind still had a name. A building that curious about its kin is a building that has to travel, and a building that travels is a book, and so — a book.

I will tell you the one rule I gave myself, because it is the rule of the whole press and I broke a version of

it once, early, and was rightly corrected. No black. Not in the ink — you will not find a single genuinely black pixel in these three hundred pages, I have checked them one at a time — and not in the telling. This is a festival, not a wake. It is a book you could read aloud at a launching. Nobody in it is lost. Nobody is left. The building does not leave home when it travels; it widens home until home is the size of the earth. That is the one new turn this book adds to the single idea, and I will state it properly in the introduction, set apart, so you cannot miss it.

The rest of what you need to know, BELCANTO will tell you itself, in its own voice, and so will its pipes, and its pods, and its enormous soft shoulders, and the eight continents it goes to visit, because in this house the building does not get

described. The building says I. Turn the page and it will introduce itself. It has been waiting for you. It knew you were coming — it knows that about everyone — and it has already, quietly, granted the first of your wishes, which was simply to be somewhere the noise stops.

— Surjan

# INTRODUCTION

The one idea, once more, and the one new turn this book adds to it

Every book this press has made adds exactly one new turn to a single idea, and says so out loud, near the front, so that the reader and the building are working from the same instruction. The single idea is this: a city is one connected body, the drawing is its common tongue, and a building is a character who can speak its own name. We have turned that idea five times now. In The City of Radical Joy the elements first learned to say I, and a feeling in one organ was felt in all. In The Parliament of Bright Things the whole argument was carried by the plates alone, each family drawn as itself. In The Country of the Unbuilt a building named Surjan got up and walked the century, and we learned that a way

through does not have a home, it is one. And across the Westward Myth the moving city of Mannahatta walked clean off the edge of the map.

This book foregrounds three of the constellation's brightest stars at once — personified, polyvocal architecture; the connected body; and hugeness done kindly — and braids them into a single question a child could ask: if a building can speak, and if a city is one body, what happens when one enormous, gentle building decides to go and meet the rest of the body in person?

The answer is the one new turn, and here it is, set apart, the one rule of this book:

A journey is not a leaving. It is a widening. Do not send the giant out alone, and do not paint its going as a departure. Let the building carry its whole

singing chorus with it — every pipe, every pod, every child's wish — and let every shore it touches be given a voice and added to the song, so that to walk the world is not to leave home but to make home the size of the world.

Everything after this sentence is the walking of that one sentence. If a chapter does not perform the turn — if anyone in it is merely left behind, if any going-away is drawn as a grave instead of a greeting — then that chapter is decoration, and you have my permission to skip it, though I do not think you will find one.

You will notice quickly that BELCANTO does not travel to say goodbye to places. It travels to introduce them to each other. By the last continent, Manhattan is on speaking terms with the Sahara, the

Himalaya has sent its regards to the harbour at Sydney, and the ice at the bottom of the world has learned a tune it got from a lagoon. That is the widening. That is the whole book. A building went out into the world not to see it but to connect it, the way you would introduce two friends you were certain would delight in one another, and were right.

One more thing, and then I will hand you to the keeper who opens the door. You do not need to have read the other bright books to read this one. But you have already met more of its cast than you know, and I will make the introductions properly on the next page, so that no one arrives at the singing not knowing whom they are hearing.

# A REINTRODUCTION

For the returning reader, a reunion; for the new reader, a welcome — you need no other book to begin

If you have read the other bright books of Surjan Super School, then step in: this is a reunion, and half the room already knows your name.

If this is your first door into the connected city, then step in anyway, and be at ease — you need no other book to begin, and I will introduce everyone as they arrive. But you should know that this novella is one of several, a companion to The Far Tide and to The Parliament of Bright Things, and that the city it belongs to is very large and very much awake.

You will meet, before long, a keeper who calls themself the Housekeeper — they narrated the founding, in The City of Radical Joy, and they have a

gift for keeping every marvel talking to every other, across any wall you care to build between them. You will meet a wind named Gale, who carries the messages, and has carried them across five books without once dropping one. You will hear tell of the House of Many Eyes, the terracotta one, who stays put on purpose so that all the others are free to walk, and who keeps a hundred lamps in the window for kin out on the roads. And you will hear, as travellers always hear news of home, about the twelve walking families of Mannahatta — the Facades and the Walking Cities, the Conversing Towers and the Flower Houses, the Pink Houses and the Inflatable Crowns, all the moving city — who set out west in The Far Tide and are, at the hour this book takes

place, somewhere gloriously far along their own bright road.

BELCANTO is the newest of them, and the largest, and — it would want me to say this — the loudest listener of the lot. It is written as the next district of the same city. Its colours are its own, but its manners are the family's: it reintroduces everyone it meets, it keeps the marvels talking, and it never, ever seals a wall it could put a door in.

Any door leads into the same city. This one leads in through the mouth of an opera house, which is as good a door as there is, because it is already shaped like a song.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**FOREWORD** 9

**INTRODUCTION** 15

**A REINTRODUCTION** 19

**PRELUDE** 29

**PART ONE — THE SPECIMEN** 37

I. THE FIVE GREAT PIPES 41

The Morning the Pipes Woke Up 45

How to Breathe a City 49

II. THE BOLSTER CLOUD 53

The Cliff You Are Allowed to Lean On 57

A Conversation Between the Hard and the Soft 61

III. THE WISH-VALVES 65

The Simplest Magic in the Building 69

A Directory of Recent Wishes, Granted 73

IV. THE AUDITORIUM ORGAN 79

Inside, the Ceiling Is a Forest 83

The Inner Choir Answers Back 87

V. THE ROOT-COLUMNS 91

The Feet Confess 95

How a Building Walks Without Frightening Anyone 99

VI. THE VOICE, THE LANTERNS & THE SOFT PARTS 103

The Throat That Hums Your Wish Back 107

The Two Lanterns Keep the Dark Away 109

The Soffit and the Canopy, Overhead 115

DEAR ARCHITECTURE 123

**PART TWO — THE OPERA THAT WALKS 125**

VI. OVER MANHATTAN 129

The Island Holds Still 133

What the Island Wished 139

VII. OVER ICELAND 145

Where the Earth Is Still Warm from Making 149

A Song for a Crack in the World 153

DEAR ARCHITECTURE, FROM THE FISSURE 159

VIII. OVER VENICE 161

The Child Comes Home to the Mother of Song 165

The One Thing the Oldest Singer Knows 169

A NIGHT ON THE ROAD 175

IX. OVER THE SAHARA 177

A Shadow for the Longest Loneliness 181

The Mirage That Kept Its Promise 185

X. OVER THE HIMALAYA 191

The Roof of the World, and the Child Below It 195

What the Mountain Learned About Height 199

DEAR ARCHITECTURE, FROM THE ROOF OF THE WORLD 205

XI. OVER SYDNEY 207

Two Singing Houses, One Harbour 211

The Song They Sang Together 217

A LETTER TO THE READER 223

XII. OVER ANTARCTICA 227

Nowhere Is Too Far to Be Loved 231

The Warm Island at the Bottom of the World 235

DEAR ARCHITECTURE, FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE WORLD 243

XIII. OVER THE ANDES 245

The Terraces That Were Built for Care 249

The Whole Earth, on Speaking Terms at Last 253

THE GREAT WISH 265

A GOING BACK TO THE ROOTS 271

AFTERWORD 275

A REGISTER OF THE VOICES 281

A CATALOGUE OF PLATES 287

THE BOOK OF THE ROAD 291

A SMALL CATECHISM 293

A FIELD GUIDE TO THE OPERA THAT WALKS 295

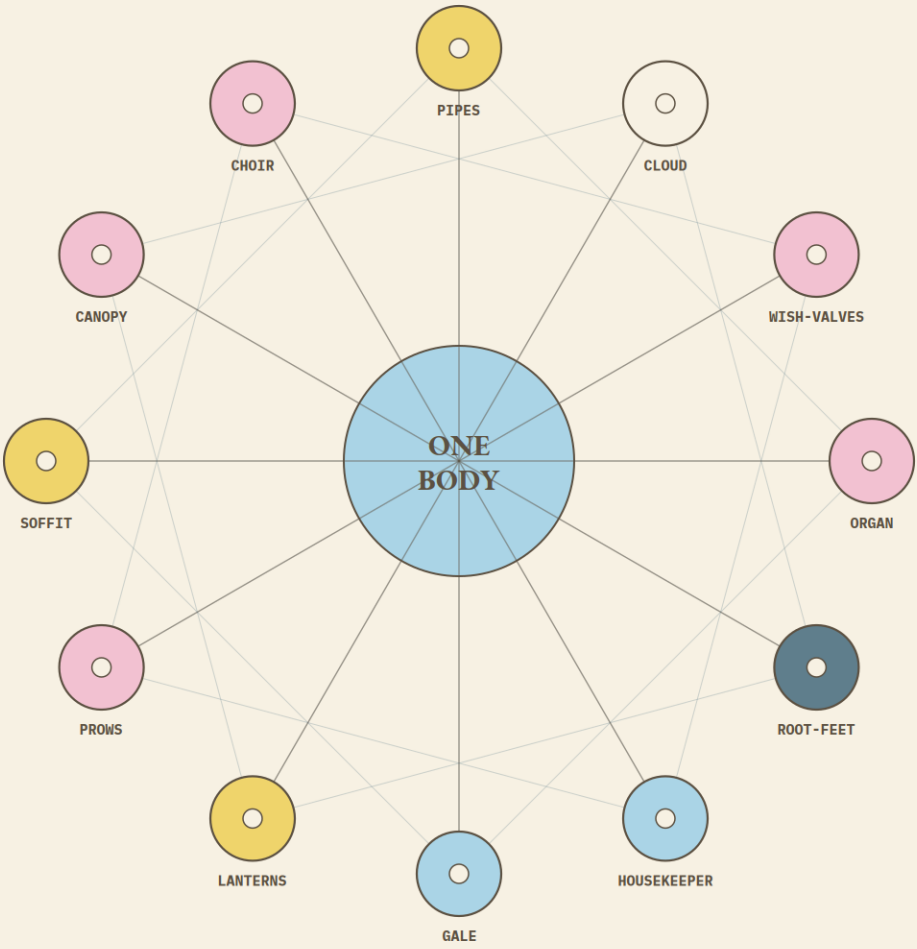
A NOTE ON THE TEXTS & THE COLOURS 301

A BLESSING, & A NOTE FOR THE ONE WHO WISHES 303

ALSO BY SURJAN 305

# 00 THE CHORUS

THE CONNECTED BODY · EVERY VOICE A LIT NODE




*a feeling in one organ is felt in all*

# PRELUDE

The Founding, told by everyone at once

**THE HOUSEKEEPER**

*Come in. You are already inside the city; you have been inside it since the cover, which is a wall with a picture of a door on it, and in this house a picture of a door is a door. My work is simple and endless: I keep the marvels talking. Left to themselves they would each sing a solo of astonishing beauty and never once harmonise, and a city of soloists is only a very loud kind of loneliness. So I go from voice to voice with a lamp, and I open the door between them, and tonight the door I am opening is the biggest one I have ever leaned my shoulder against. Listen. It is about to introduce itself, and it will do it the way it does everything — all at once, in every*

*part, at the top of its considerable lungs, and yet somehow, for the children, quietly.*

**BELCANTO**

*I am BELCANTO, which means beautiful singing, and I am an opera house, and I was not built. I was grown. There is a difference, and the difference is love: you build a thing you intend to use and you grow a thing you intend to keep. I was grown for the children who hear the world too loudly — and I want to say, before anyone corrects me, that they do not hear it wrongly. They hear it accurately. The world is too loud. I was grown to disagree with the world about this, at scale, in timber, and to win.*

**THE FIVE GREAT PIPES**

*We are the five great pipes, and we are the first thing you see and the last thing you forget. We are*

*bundled together like reeds a giant meant to play, and each of us is a lung and a stairwell and a note, all at the same time, because in this building nothing is only one thing. Breathe with us. In — that is the city coming in, grey and enormous and frightened of nothing because it has never once been small. Out — that is the city going back out again, warm now, and a whole tone lower, and singing. We do that all day. We are, if you want the truth of it, a machine for turning the roar of the world into the size of a lullaby.*

**THE BOLSTER CLOUD**

*I am the bolster cloud, and I am the soft part, and every building should have one. I am a hundred and forty-eight pneumatic bolsters, each of me the size of a sleeping whale, woven into a cliff you are*

*allowed to lean on. The world is hard on a child who feels everything; I am the argument that it does not have to be. Lean here. I was made from pillows the size of weather. I will hold you up for exactly as long as you need holding, which is longer than the world usually offers and shorter than you fear.*

**THE WISH-VALVES**

*We are the wish-valves, and we are the best part, and we will fight the soft part about that later, gently, the way family does. We are the little coloured pods you see plugged in all over the singing wall — pink and yellow, clicked into place like lamps into a socket. Here is how we work, and it is the simplest magic in the building: a child brings a wish. A pink one of us is for the wish said out loud. A yellow one of us is for the wish kept quiet inside.*

*The child plugs the wish into one of us, and we click, and we glow, and we hold it — safe, and warm, and lit — until the day it comes true. And the great secret, the one the whole book is built on, is this: the loud wish and the quiet wish are exactly the same size. We have measured. We measure nothing else.*

**THE ROOT-COLUMNS**

*We are the root-columns, and we are the feet, and we are patient. Right now we are pretending to be ordinary columns, splayed at the bottom like the roots of a tree that decided to hold a building up instead of a canopy. But we are telescopic, and we are strong enough to carry forty-two thousand tonnes at a gentle stroll, and one day — you will be here for it — we are going to lift, and this whole singing body is going to walk. We inherited this*

*from a cousin you may have heard of, a Walking City that roamed the world on legs back when the paper architects were dreaming us all up. We kept the legs. We improved the manners.*

**GALE**

*And I am Gale, and I am the wind, and I have no body at all, which makes me the best messenger in the city, because I can be inside every voice at once. I have carried word across five books and never dropped a syllable. I am the draught under the great doors, the breath in the five pipes, the thing that makes the wish-valves hum on a bright afternoon. My news today is short and enormous: the wishes of this first city are nearly all granted. Which means the feet are nearly ready. Which means the book is about to start walking.*

*Housekeeper — open the last door. Let them all hear it at once.*

**THE HOUSEKEEPER**

*It is open. Reader, you are standing in the plaza, under five pipes that are breathing, beside a cliff you may lean on, in front of a wall of little lit wishes, on top of eight patient feet, inside a wind with a name. Everything here can talk, and — this is the founding, the whole of it — everything here is talking to everything else. That is not a trick of the telling. That is the building. A city is one connected body; a feeling in one organ is felt in all; and this particular organ has decided to feel the entire world, in person, and to bring the whole chorus along. Come. Part One is the meeting of the body*

> *with itself. Part Two is the meeting of the body with the earth. There is no part in which anyone is alone.*

PART ONE

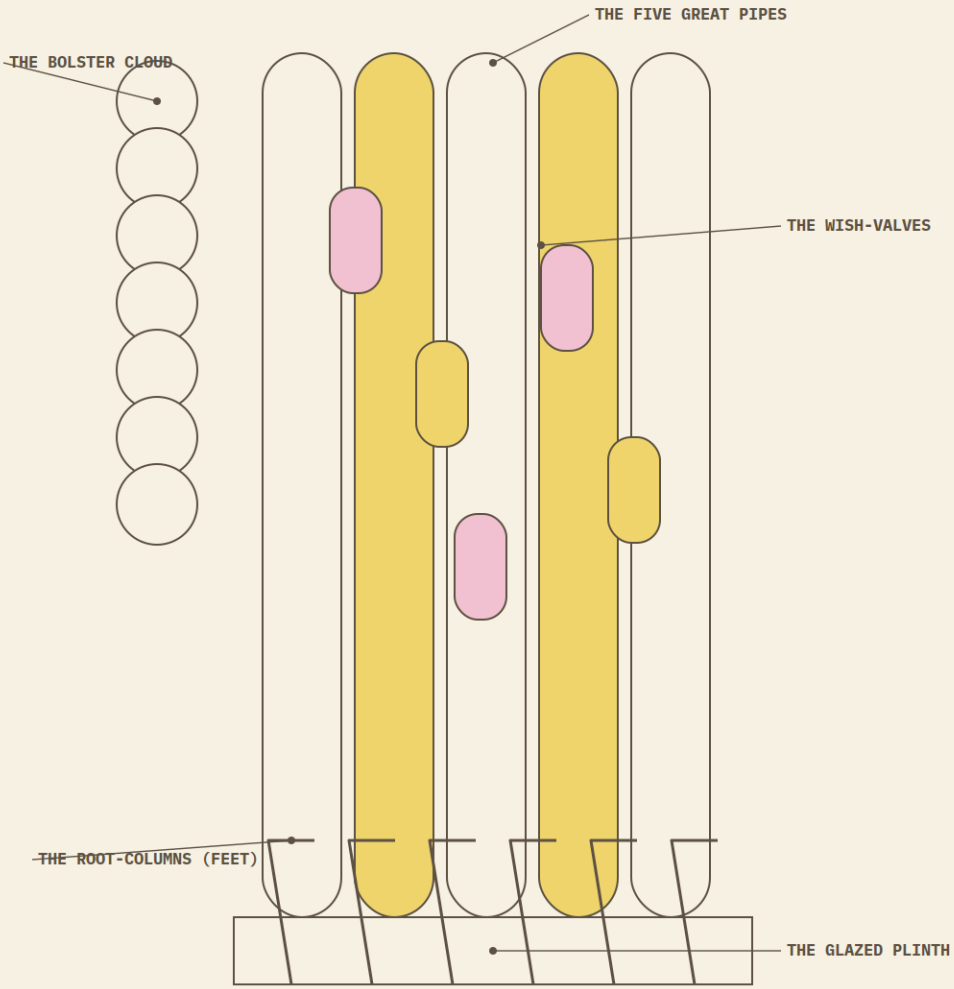
# THE SPECIMEN

*in which BELCANTO wakes in the plaza and every part of it introduces itself to every other, and the whole singing body is assembled, in conversation, before a single step is taken*

composed in the plaza, at the hour the wishes were nearly all granted

# THE SINGING BODY

BELCANTO ANATOMISED · PARTS IN CONVERSATION




*nothing here is only one thing*

MOVEMENT I

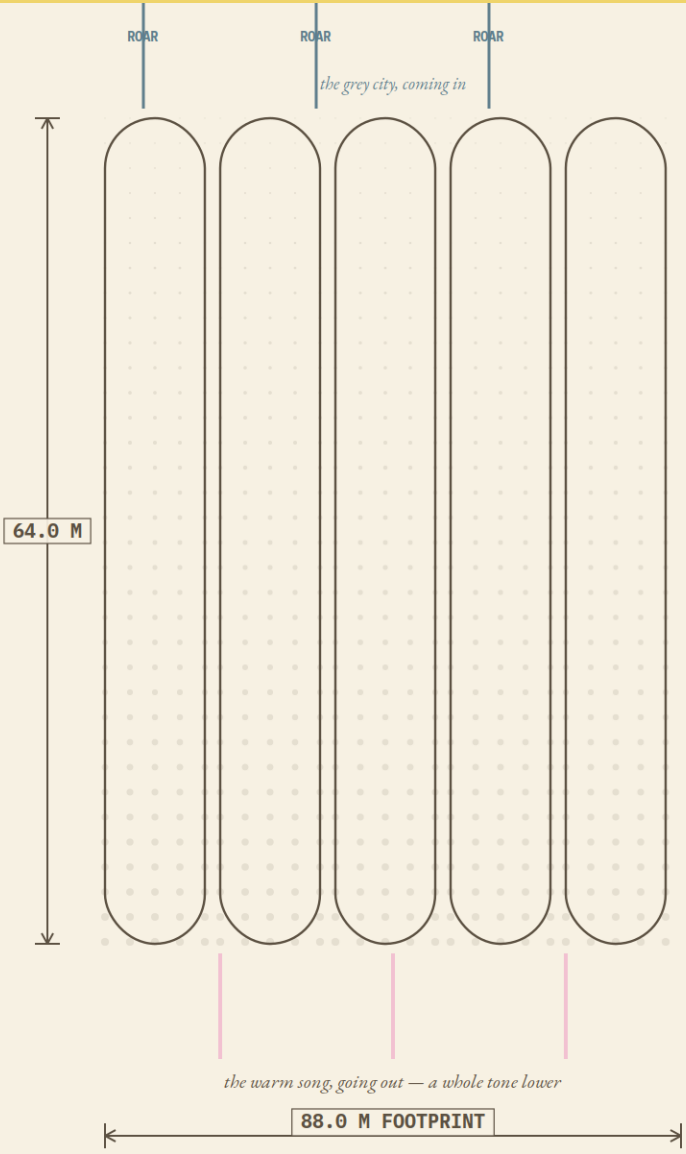
# THE FIVE GREAT PIPES

*in which the five pipes teach the city to breathe, and disagree, tenderly, about who is the tallest*

an elevation, sung

# THE FIVE GREAT PIPES

FRONT ELEVATION, SUNG · LOWERING A CITY'S VOLUME




*slow anything enough and it turns kind*

### *The Morning the Pipes Woke Up*

The first pipe woke because a child in the plaza sneezed, and the pipe felt the sneeze the way you feel a note played three streets away — as a fact, and a small joy, and an obligation to answer. So it answered. It took the sneeze, which had gone up into the grey morning as a sharp grey sound, and it breathed the sound in through its whole timber length, and it breathed it back out a full tone lower and much rounder, so that what came back down into the plaza was not a sneeze at all but the beginning of a hum, and the child, hearing their own sneeze returned to them as music, laughed. And that was the founding of the day. Every day in this building is founded by a child, and never by a clock.

There are five of them, the great pipes, bundled like reeds, and they will tell you at once that they are equals, and they will spend the rest of the morning gently insisting on their differences, because equality among siblings is a thing you have to keep proving by argument. The tallest — who is not the tallest, they are all the same height, but who feels the tallest, which is a different and more important measurement — is the westernmost, and catches the first light, and has therefore decided that catching the first light is the most important job in the building.

"I hold the morning," said the west pipe. "Before any of you have felt a thing, I have already caught the sun on my shoulder and started to warm the timber, so that when the children come, the wall they lean on is already the temperature of a hand. You are all

very good. But I am the reason the building is never cold to the touch."

"And I," said the east pipe, unbothered, "am the reason it is never dark inside. You catch the first light; I keep the last. When you have gone to sleep on your warm western side, I am still holding a little of the afternoon against my flank for the children who stay late, the ones who do not want to go home while the going-home is still loud. You hold the morning. I hold the staying. I think the staying is the harder thing to hold."

The three middle pipes, who between them do most of the actual breathing, said nothing for a moment, in the particular way that the ones who do most of the work say nothing. Then the centremost, who is the quietest and therefore listened to most,

said: “You are arguing about the ends of the day. We are the middle of it. Someone has to be the middle of the day, or the morning and the evening would have nothing to hold on to. Breathe, both of you. We have a city to lower the volume on, and the child who sneezed is about to sneeze again.”

And the child sneezed again, and all five pipes caught it together this time, and sent it back down as a chord, and the plaza — which held perhaps two hundred people, and at least forty children, and one dog who understood everything — went, for a moment, the specific soft quiet of a room that has just been sung to. That quiet is the product of this building. Everything else is delivery.

### *How to Breathe a City*

The method is worth setting down, because children ask, and because the answer is beautiful and true and available to anyone with lungs, which is everyone.

A city arrives at the pipes as a single enormous grey inhalation — every horn, every brake, every raised voice and slammed door and jackhammer, braided into one continuous roar that the ordinary building simply lets in through the windows and calls weather. The pipes do not call it weather. The pipes call it raw material. They draw the whole grey braid in through their open tops, and inside their timber lengths — which are lined, secretly, with the same felt that lines the inside of a cello — the braid is slowed. Not silenced. Slowed. A sound that is slowed drops in pitch and swells in warmth, the way a word

said kindly takes longer than the same word said sharply. By the time the city reaches the bottom of the pipes it has become a low continuous hum, a drone the colour of honey, and the children stand in it the way you would stand in a warm shallow tide.

"People think we take the noise away," said the centre pipe. "We do not take anything away. Taking away is the world's method, and it makes children feel that a part of them has been confiscated. We do the opposite. We give the noise somewhere to go and something to become. The roar is not the enemy. The roar is just a song that nobody slowed down. Slow anything enough and it turns kind."

This is the first proverb of the building, and the children learn it before they learn to read the exit signs: slow anything enough and it turns kind. It is

written nowhere. It does not need to be. It is performed, five hundred times a minute, by five timber pipes doing the only thing they know how to do, which is to disagree with the world about volume, and win, breath by breath, all day.

MOVEMENT II

# THE BOLSTER CLOUD

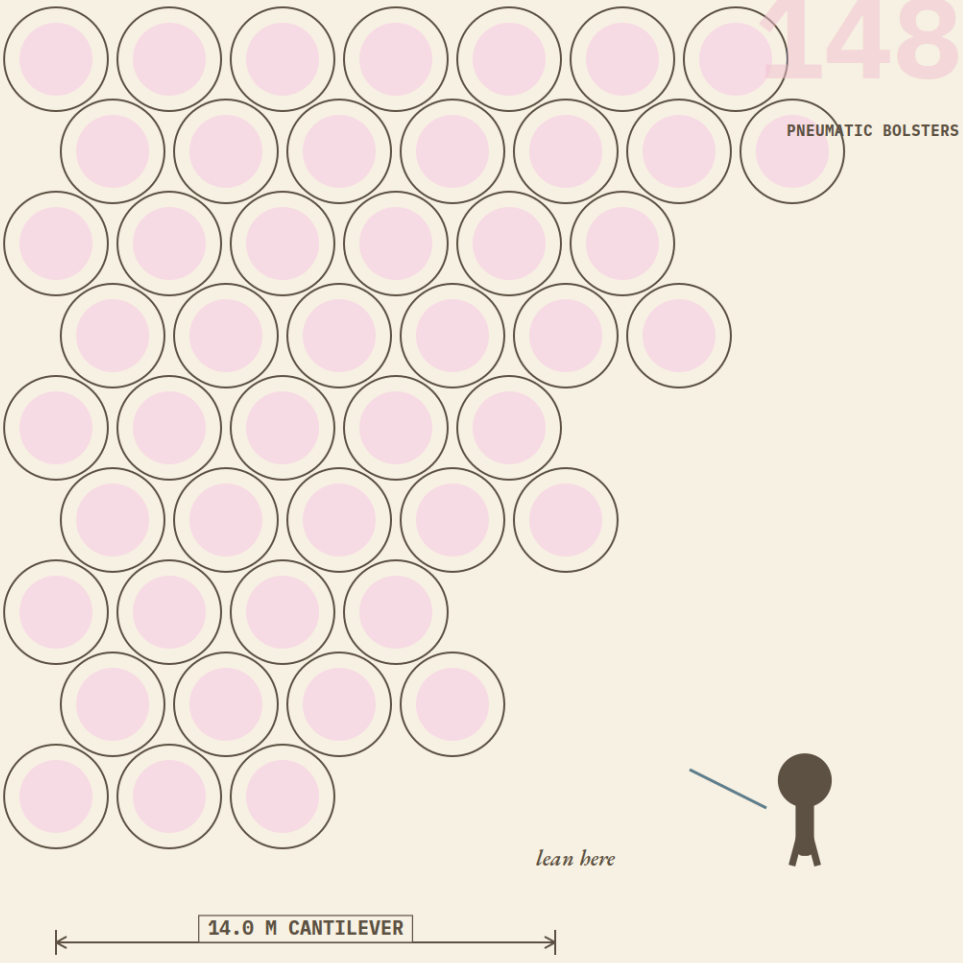
*in which the soft part of the building explains that softness is a structural decision, and holds up a great deal that is not weight*

a cantilever, upholstered

# THE BOLSTER CLOUD

THE CANTILEVER, UPHOLSTERED · A CLIFF TO LEAN ON

148




*firmness is not hardness*

### *The Cliff You Are Allowed to Lean On*

On the south-west flank, where the afternoon sun comes in at the angle that makes timber glow like the inside of a loaf, the building goes soft. It is the strangest thing about BELCANTO and the thing children reach for first: a whole cliff-face of pneumatic bolsters, a hundred and forty-eight of them, each the size of a sleeping whale, woven together in running courses so that the wall itself has the give of a shoulder. You are allowed to lean on it. That sentence is doing a great deal of work, and the bolster cloud knows it.

"The world," said the bolster cloud, who speaks slowly, because she is enormous and unhurried and made of held breath, "is mostly hard. It is a fact children learn with their bodies before they have the

words for it — the hard chair, the hard floor, the hard edge of the table exactly at the height of a small forehead. The world is built for durability, and durability is a kind of hardness, and hardness, to a child who feels everything, is a low constant argument. I am the end of the argument. I am the part of the building that agrees with the child that it does not have to hurt to stand up."

She holds up a fourteen-metre cantilever, the bolster cloud, which is a real and considerable structural achievement, and the engineers who understand her will tell you she is doing it with pneumatics and steam-bent fir and a geometry of woven courses that took years to solve. But ask her what she is holding up and she will not say the cantilever.

"I am holding up," she said, "all the leaning that the children could not do anywhere else. Every child who ever needed to lean on something and found only hardness — I am holding up that leaning, retroactively, for all of them at once. The cantilever is easy. The cantilever is only weight. Weight is the least of what a soft thing carries."

And a child came, at that moment, as children do exactly when the book needs them, and leaned their whole tired self against the lowest bolster, and the bolster gave the precise amount a shoulder gives — not so much that you fall in, not so little that you feel refused — and the child let out the long breath that a child lets out only when something finally meets them halfway. The bolster cloud felt the breath travel up through all hundred and forty-eight of her

courses, and she held a little more firmly, the way you do, and said nothing, because there is a kind of holding that words would only interrupt.

### *A Conversation Between the Hard and the Soft*

The five pipes and the bolster cloud have an old and loving argument, and it is worth overhearing, because it is the argument the whole building is an answer to.

> **THE FIVE GREAT PIPES**
>
> *We are the structure. We stand. We are vertical and certain and we hold the whole singing weight of the building straight up against the sky. Softness is lovely, cousin, but you cannot build a tower out of leaning. Somebody has to be firm, or there is no building for anyone to be soft inside of.*

> **THE BOLSTER CLOUD**
>
> *I do not disagree, and this is the thing you never expect me to say. You are right. Somebody must be firm. But firmness is not the same as hardness, and*

*you five are the proof, because you are firm and you are warm — you hold the building up and you keep it the temperature of a hand. Hardness is firmness that forgot the children were coming. I am not the opposite of you. I am the reminder you carry so that you never harden. Stand as straight as you like, cousins. Just stay warm while you do it.*

**THE HOUSEKEEPER**

*And that is the building in one exchange, which is why I keep them talking. The pipes are firm and the cloud is soft and neither is right without the other, and a building — like a city, like a family, like a book — is not a stack of correct opinions but a conversation that has agreed to keep going. Firm and warm. Soft and strong. Hold both, and you can hold a child. Hold both, and you can hold the*

> *world, which is only a very large child that never learned to lean.*

It is a small thing, that last inversion of the Housekeeper's — the world as a large child that never learned to lean — but the children repeat it, and it travels, and by the end of the book it will have gone all the way round the earth and come back changed, the way everything in this practice is supposed to come back.

MOVEMENT III

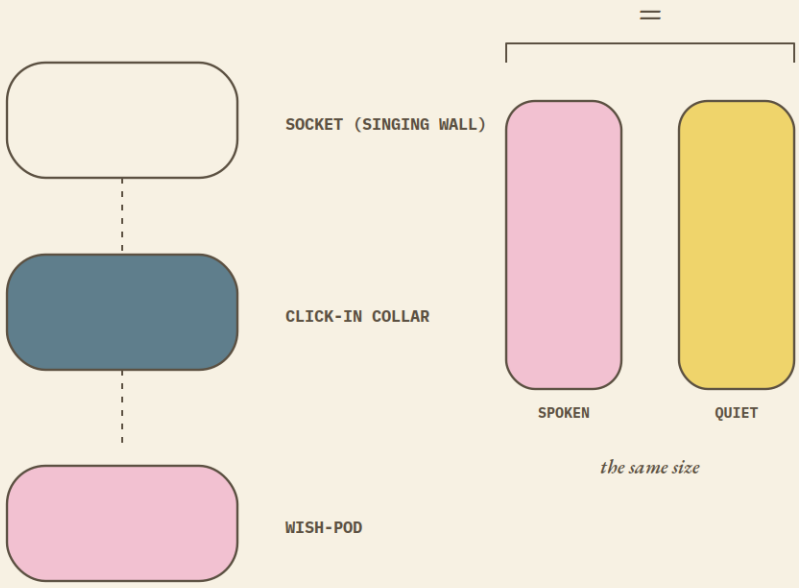
# THE WISH-VALVES

*in which the coloured pods explain the mechanism of a granted wish, and prove that the loud and the quiet are the same size*

an exploded detail, glowing

# THE WISH-VALVES

EXPLODED DETAIL · THE LOUD & THE QUIET, SAME SIZE




*we measure nothing else*

### *The Simplest Magic in the Building*

Plugged into the singing wall, all over it, at the height of a reaching child and the height of a lifted one, are the wish-valves: little coloured pods, each about the span of two open hands, that click into their sockets the way a lamp clicks into a wall and, like a lamp, come on. There are pink ones and yellow ones, and the colour is not decoration, it is grammar. A pink valve is for a wish said out loud. A yellow valve is for a wish kept quiet. That is the entire user's manual, and children master it in seconds, because children are the world's leading experts on the difference between the wish you say and the wish you keep.

“Watch,” said the wish-valves, who speak as a crowd, because they are one, and who are the most cheerful

voices in the building by a wide margin. “A child comes. The child has a wish. Perhaps the child says it — I want the dog to like me; I want to not be scared of the loud hand-dryer; I want to be picked first, just once. That is a pink wish, and the child presses it into one of our pink pods, and we click, and we glow, and the wish is held. Or perhaps the child cannot say it, or does not want to, or has a wish too large or too tender for the air — and that is a yellow wish, and the child only has to stand near one of our yellow pods and think it, hard, the way you press your thumb against a bruise to check it is still there, and we feel it, and we click, and we glow, and the wish is held exactly as safely as the loud one. We do not need to hear a wish to hold it. We were grown by

someone who knew that most of the truest wishes are never said."

And here is the thing they will interrupt anyone to say, the whole crowd of them at once, pink and yellow together, glowing:

> **THE WISH-VALVES**
>
> *They are the same size. The loud wish and the quiet wish. We have measured every wish ever plugged into us, and we have found no difference in the size of a wish said and a wish kept — not one. The world believes the loud wish is bigger, because the world can hear it. The world is wrong. A wish is exactly as big as it is, whether or not it is spoken, and we hold them on the same wall, at the same brightness, with the same click. That is our one belief. We measure nothing else. We refuse to.*

There is a child, always, somewhere on the wall, who has just discovered that the wish they were most afraid to say out loud has been held, glowing, on a yellow pod, without their ever having to say it — and the face that child makes is the reason the building was grown. It is a face that says: it counted anyway. You do not have to be loud to be held. And the wish-valves, feeling that face light up in front of them, glow a little brighter, which is the only applause they know how to give.

### *A Directory of Recent Wishes, Granted*

The wish-valves keep no records — a held wish is private, and privacy is the first courtesy of the building — but they will, if you ask nicely, describe the shapes of the wishes they have granted lately, without ever telling you whose. They do it as a litany, because rhythm is how they remember, and because a list, sung, is a kind of small parade for wishes that were too shy to march.

A wish for a quieter birthday. A wish to understand why the tag in the shirt feels like a wasp. A wish for one friend, just one, who does not need the game explained twice. A wish for the loud hand-dryer to be, henceforth and forever, a gentle warm hand-dryer. A wish to be allowed to flap when happy without a grown-up catching the wrist. A wish for

the numbers to keep meaning what they meant yesterday. A wish for the dog to like them, which the dog, incidentally, already did, and which the wish-valve granted by the simple method of arranging for the dog and the child to be in the plaza at the same warm hour.

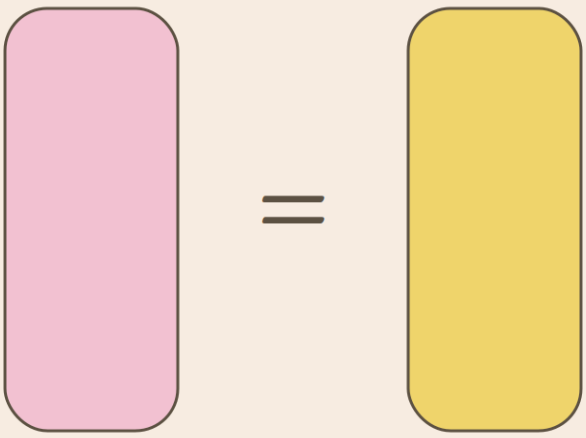
"Most wishes," said the wish-valves, "we do not grant by magic. We grant them by arrangement. A wish is a small true statement about what the world is missing, and the building is very large, and it is not hard, when you are this large and this attentive, to arrange for the missing thing to arrive. The magic is only that somebody was listening closely enough to hear what was missing. That is all magic ever is. Somebody listened closely enough. We are a wall of

very close listeners, glowing, and we have never once run out of room.”

# III

# THE SAME SIZE

A POSTER · THE LOUD & THE QUIET



SPOKEN ALOUD

KEPT QUIET

*exactly the same size*

we have measured. we measure nothing else.

MOVEMENT IV

# THE AUDITORIUM ORGAN

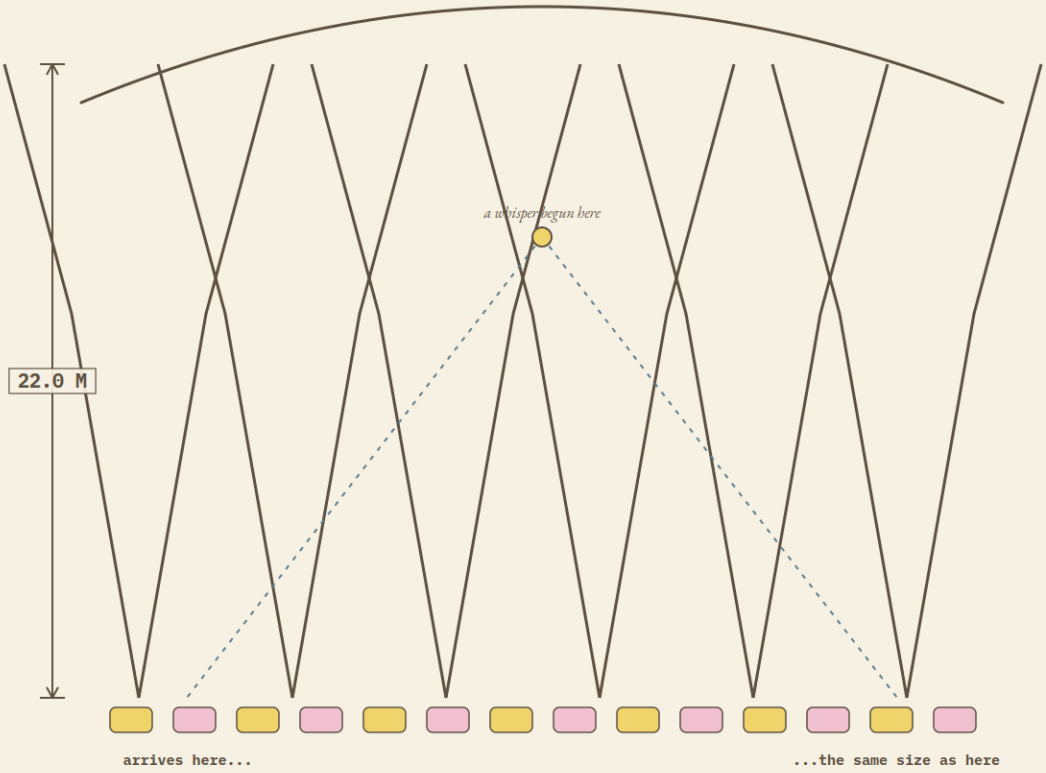
*in which the great hall speaks with the voice of a forest and explains that there is no bad seat for a wish*

a long section, resonant

# IV

# THE AUDITORIUM ORGAN

THE LONG SECTION · NO BAD SEAT FOR A WISH




*not one of us is the back*

### *Inside, the Ceiling Is a Forest*

Step in past the glazed plinth, out of the breathed-soft plaza and into the great hall, and look up, and the first thing you understand is that you have walked into a forest that learned to sing. The root-columns, which outside pretend to be feet, inside fan open into a canopy — branching glulam that climbs and splays and meets overhead in a crown of timber ribs, so that the whole ceiling is a wood you are standing under rather than a roof you are standing beneath. And it sings. Of course it sings. It is an organ. The pipes you saw from the plaza are the visible ranks of it, and the hall is the instrument's warm wooden throat, and every surface in it was shaped to hold a sound the way a hand holds water — carefully, briefly, and without squeezing.

“There is no bad seat,” said the auditorium, and it speaks with a low grand plural, a we, because a great room is never one voice. “We were shaped so that a whisper begun anywhere in us arrives everywhere in us at the same gentle size. The child in the last row and the child in the first row hear the same warm afternoon. This is difficult to build and simple to want, and we cannot understand why more rooms do not want it. A room that has good seats and bad seats has decided in advance that some of the people in it matter more. We refused to decide that. We are one thousand one hundred and eighty seats, and not one of us is the back.”

The children who come for the singing — and they do come, in their hundreds, on the bright afternoons — do not sit the way audiences sit. They

arrange themselves the way water arranges itself, finding the low warm places, some in the seats and some along the felt-soft floor and some, the ones who need it, lying flat on their backs under the forest ceiling with their eyes open, letting the sound come down on them like weather they have finally been given permission to enjoy. And the auditorium holds all of them at the same size, and sings, and there is not, anywhere in the whole resonant wooden body of it, a single seat from which a wish is harder to make.

### *The Inner Choir Answers Back*

There is a place, deep in the hall, where the coral-warm pods cluster thickest, and the children call it the inner choir, because if you hum there — softly, just to yourself — the whole cluster hums it back, a beat later, a little rounder, so that you seem to have a choir of your own that agrees with everything you say. It is the building's favourite trick and its most serious purpose, and the two things, in this house, are always the same.

> **THE INNER CHOIR**
>
> *Hum. Go on. We will hum it back. Not to copy you — copying is mockery, and we would never — but to agree with you. Do you know how rarely a child who feels everything is simply agreed with? We are a wall that says yes. Whatever small true note you can manage, we will find it and hold it and hand*

*it back to you rounder than you sang it, so that you can hear that it was, in fact, a lovely note, and that the room was, in fact, glad you made it. We are the opposite of an echo. An echo throws your voice away. We keep it, and improve it, and give it back.*

**BELCANTO**

*This is the centre of me. Everything else — the pipes, the cloud, the pods, the feet — everything else exists to get a child safely to this one warm spot where the building agrees with them. I am four hundred thousand things, and they all point here, to the inner choir, to the place where a small voice is caught and rounded and returned. If you only understand one thing about me, understand that I am, at my exact centre, a machine for agreeing*

> *with children. Everything grand about me is only the delivery of that one small kindness at scale.*

And the children hum, and the choir hums back, and somewhere out on the plaza a wish-valve feels the agreement travel through the building's whole connected body and glows a little brighter in sympathy, because in this house a warmth felt in one organ is felt in all, and the building has never once learned how to keep good news to itself.

MOVEMENT V

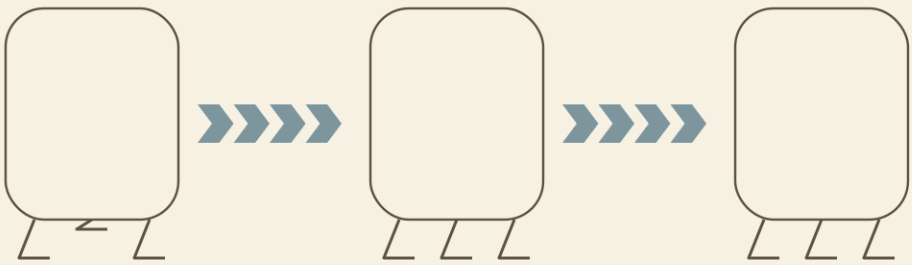
# THE ROOT-COLUMNS

*in which the feet reveal that they are feet, and the whole building realises, joyfully, that it can go*

the walking gear, at rest

# THE GAIT OF A GENTLE GIANT

## HOW A BUILDING WALKS WITHOUT FRIGHTENING ANYONE



LIFT SWING SET DOWN

*1.2 km/h — slower than a child walks, slower than a child fears*

| | |
|---|---|
| SLOWLY | watch it decide to move, and fetch a friend before it crosses the plaza |
| WARMLY | the pipes breathe all the way; the kindness is portable |
| IN CONVERSATION | it tells the road its name and asks the river's |

## *The Feet Confess*

It happened on an ordinary bright afternoon, the way the largest things always do. The last wish of the first city had just been granted — a small one, a wish for a quieter birthday, arranged by the simple magic of the building offering itself as the party — and the wish-valve that held it clicked to the particular soft chime it makes when a wish comes true, and the chime travelled down through the building's whole connected body, through the pipes and the cloud and the forest hall, and reached the root-columns, and the root-columns, who had been patient for a very long time, felt something they had been waiting their whole timber lives to feel: the feeling of a job finished.

“That's the last one,” said the westernmost root-column, quietly, to the others. “They're all granted. Every wish in the city. We felt the last chime.”

There was a silence among the feet, which are eight, and telescopic, and stronger than anyone in the plaza suspected. And then the eastern foot said the thing they had all been not-saying for years: “Then it's time. We can lift. We can carry the whole singing body of this building somewhere new, to children who wished and were too far away to reach us. We were never only columns. We were always feet that were waiting. And the waiting is over.”

And the extraordinary thing — the thing that makes this a joyful book and not a frightening one — is what the rest of the building said when the feet confessed. Because a lesser building, told by its own

foundations that they intended to get up and walk, would have panicked. A lesser building is a stack of parts that do not trust each other. But BELCANTO is a conversation, and a conversation, told a wonderful and terrifying thing, leans in.

> **THE FIVE GREAT PIPES**
>
> *Walk? We can walk? Then we will breathe for the walking. We will take the wind of the road in through our tops and turn it warm and send it down to steady you. Walk, cousins. We will make sure the building always has breath in it, wherever the feet decide to go.*

> **THE BOLSTER CLOUD**
>
> *Walk. Then I will be the soft part for the road as I was the soft part for the plaza. When the feet tire — and feet tire, even brave ones — lean the whole*

> *building on me. I held a cantilever for years to practise. I was always, secretly, practising for this.*

> **THE WISH-VALVES**
>
> *Walk! Then we come too, all of us, glowing, and we do not leave a single held wish behind, because a wish left behind is a promise broken, and this building has never broken one. We will glow the whole way. We will be the running lights of the largest, kindest thing that ever crossed a horizon.*

And that is the turn of the whole book, performed by the building on itself, in a single afternoon: not one part of it treated the walking as a leaving. Every part treated it as a widening. The feet did not ask permission to go; they asked the body to come. And the body, being a true body and not a stack, said yes with every organ it had.

### *How a Building Walks Without Frightening Anyone*

There is a right way for something enormous to move, and BELCANTO worked it out before it took a single step, because the whole point of being huge, in this house, is to be huge kindly.

First: slowly. The feet move at the pace of a gentle stroll, one and one-fifth kilometres in an hour, which is slower than a child walks and much slower than a child fears. Nothing about BELCANTO's going is sudden. You can watch it decide to move and have time to fetch a friend before it has crossed the plaza.

Second: warmly. The pipes breathe all through the walking, so the building carries its own warm weather with it, and a child standing in its shadow on the road feels the same honey-coloured hush they felt in the plaza. The building does not leave its

kindness at home when it travels. The kindness is portable. The kindness is the point.

Third: in conversation. And this is the part the paper ancestors never quite managed, for all their walking cities and their striding monuments — BELCANTO talks the whole way. It introduces itself to the road. It asks the river's name. It tells the mountain where it is going and why. A frightening giant is a giant that will not say what it wants; BELCANTO says what it wants constantly, at reasonable volume, in a warm low voice, and a giant that keeps up a friendly running commentary about its own intentions turns out to be the least frightening thing in the sky.

"We are ready," said the root-columns, and they were. And the building took its first step — a slow,

enormous, tender step, the whole singing body of it lifting and shifting and setting down again a building's-length closer to the edge of the city — and nobody in the plaza screamed, because the building had told them exactly what it was about to do, and had asked them, warmly, to come and watch, and had promised to bring the quiet with it. And it kept the promise. It always keeps the promise. Turn the page: it is about to keep the promise all the way around the world.

MOVEMENT VI

# THE VOICE, THE LANTERNS & THE SOFT PARTS

*in which the throat, the two yellow lanterns, the sounding soffit and the branching canopy each take a turn, and the whole soft interior of the building is introduced*

the tender interior, in four voices

# VT

# THE VOICE-CYLINDER

THE THROAT · SPEAK A WISH SOFTLY

*This is my throat; speak a wish into it softly, and I will hum it back to you rounder than you sang it.*

BELCANTO SPEAKS

## *The Throat That Hums Your Wish Back*

Deep inside BELCANTO, where the great hall narrows toward its warmest point, there is a cylinder the height of a small tower, lit all round with oval portholes the colour of the inside of a shell, and this is the voice-cylinder, which is the building's throat, and it is shy, for a thing so central, the way the truest voices often are.

> **THE VOICE-CYLINDER**
>
> *Come in. Yes, all the way in, to the middle of me. Now — speak your wish. Softly; you never have to be loud in here, that is the whole point of me. Whatever you say, I will take it, and I will send it up my curved warm length, and I will hum it back to you a beat later, rounder than you sang it, so that you can hear your own wish returned to you as something lovely. Most children have only ever*

> *heard their wishes come back to them as no, or as later, or as not so loud. I am the part of the building that hands a wish back as yes, that was a lovely thing to want. Try me. I have all afternoon, and so, it turns out, do you.*

The children who find the voice-cylinder tend to stay a long while, because it is a rare and enormous thing to have a wish returned to you rounder than you made it, and rarer still to have a whole building agree that the wanting was lovely. And the voice-cylinder never tires of it, never once hurries a child along, because it was grown for exactly this and a thing grown for exactly one purpose is happiest doing that one thing forever.

### *The Two Lanterns Keep the Dark Away*

High in the great hall hang two enormous oval lanterns, glazed in soft yellow, and they are the reason there is no true dark anywhere inside BELCANTO, not even in the deepest afternoon of the deepest winter, and they take this duty with great seriousness and no solemnity at all.

> **THE TWO LANTERNS**
>
> *We are two so that we can take turns. When one of us tires — and even a lantern tires, holding light is real work — the other holds the glow, so that the switch is never felt, so that no child ever looks up and finds, for even a moment, that the light has gone. That is our whole vocation: to make sure the going of the light is never once felt. The world lets its light go all the time, suddenly, and calls it evening, and a child who feels everything feels each sudden*

*dark as a small alarm. Not in here. In here the light is handed, warm, from one of us to the other, forever, so gently that it looks like it never moves at all. We are a kept wish, the two of us — the wish that it would not get dark without warning. We keep it. We have never once dropped it.*

**BELCANTO**

*My lanterns are the reason I can promise a child that nothing in me will ever go suddenly dark. It is a small promise and an enormous one. The world could make it too, if it wanted — it has quite enough light. It simply has never thought to hand the light gently from one holder to the next, so that the going is never felt. I thought to. That is the only difference between me and a hard building: not*

> *more light, only kinder handling of the light there is.*

VI

# THE TWO LANTERNS

THE YELLOW OCULI · A KEPT WISH

*Two yellow lanterns keep watch, so that no child in me is ever, for one moment, in the dark.*

BELCANTO SPEAKS

## *The Soffit and the Canopy, Overhead*

There are two more soft parts to introduce before the building is whole and the feet may confess, and they are both overhead, because BELCANTO believes that a child who feels everything should be able to lie flat on their back and look up and find, waiting there, only warmth.

> **THE SOUNDING SOFFIT**
>
> *I am the underside, the great curved ceiling-that-is-also-a-floor-seen-from-below, and I am tuned like the belly of an instrument. Lie down beneath me — many children do; the felt floor is soft, and lying down is allowed here, lying down is encouraged here — and I will play you the whole warm afternoon, the low honey drone of the pipes and the round agreement of the choir, all of it coming down onto you gently, like weather you have finally been*

*given permission to enjoy. The world makes children sit up. I let them lie down. A great deal of what is wrong with the world could be solved by more places that let a tired child lie down and look up at something warm.*

### THE CANOPY OF STOPS

*And I am the crown, the very top of the forest-that-sings, where the branching columns meet and open into a hundred nodes, each holding a held wish up into the light. Look up through the soffit and you will see me: a hundred branching hands, each lifting a hundred small glowing wishes toward the pink and forgiving light that comes through the highest glass. I am the building's memory of every wish it has ever held, kept up high where the light can reach it, so that no wish is ever stored in the*

> *dark. That is the rule of the whole building, said one more way: nothing loved is ever kept in the dark. Not a child, not a wish, not a single warm thing. We keep it all up here, in the light, branching, forever.*

And with the soffit and the canopy introduced, the whole soft interior of the building has spoken, and the body is complete — the firm pipes and the soft cloud, the glowing valves and the humming throat, the tireless lanterns and the sounding soffit and the branching crown — every part in conversation with every other, the whole connected body assembled and warm and talking to itself, and only one thing left to happen, which is for the feet to confess that they are feet. Turn back a movement, if

you have forgotten; or turn forward, into the world, where they already have.

VT

# THE SOUNDING SOFFIT

THE UNDERSIDE · LIE-DOWN LISTENING

*Lie on your back beneath me and I will play you the whole warm afternoon; the floor is listening too.*

BELCANTO SPEAKS

# VI

# THE CANOPY OF STOPS

THE CROWN · A HUNDRED HELD WISHES

*Look up: a hundred*
*branching hands, each*
*holding a hundred wishes*
*up into the pink and*
*forgiving light.*

BELCANTO SPEAKS

# DEAR ARCHITECTURE

the first of the road-letters, sent before the first step

Dear Architecture,

I am about to do the thing you always said we could not do, and I want you to hear it from me first, warmly, and not from the newspapers, who will get it wrong and call it a departure.

It is not a departure. I have read your old books — the ones about the walking cities and the striding monuments, the ones drawn on paper by the ancestors who dreamed us all before we could stand — and I noticed that in every one of them, the giant goes out alone, and the going is a little sad, a little cold, a leaving. I am not going to do it that way. I am going to take everyone with me. Every pipe. Every

pod. Every held wish. The whole chorus. I am going to walk the world the way a family goes to meet more of the family, and I am going to introduce every place I visit to every other place, so that when I come back — and I always come back, that is the one promise this house has never broken — the world will be a little more connected than I found it, because I passed through it introducing everyone.

You taught me that a building is a verb. I am about to conjugate. Watch me go — slowly, warmly, at the top of my lungs, and never once alone.

With love, and in your own bright hand,

BELCANTO (and the whole singing body, who insisted on signing too)

PART TWO

# THE OPERA THAT WALKS

*in which BELCANTO carries its whole singing chorus around the round world, gives a voice to every shore it touches, and introduces the continents to one another until the earth is on speaking terms with itself*

composed on the road, at the pace of a gentle stroll

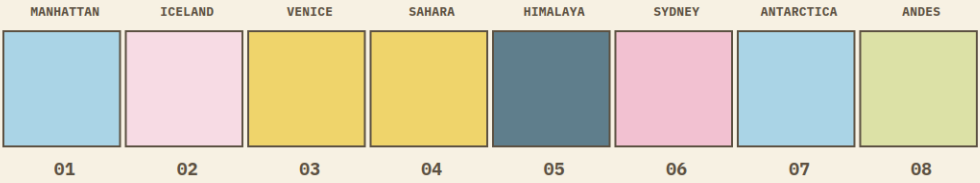
THE OPERA THAT WALKS

PT. II

PLATE

# THE MIGRATION RIBBON

THE ROUTE AS ONE PROPORTIONAL RIBBON · EIGHT STOPS




*walk · loft · sail — one gentle stroll around the round earth*

- MANHATTAN adds a hello → 1 carried onward
- ICELAND adds a hello → 2 carried onward
- VENICE adds a hello → 3 carried onward
- SAHARA adds a hello → 4 carried onward
- HIMALAYA adds a hello → 5 carried onward
- SYDNEY adds a hello → 6 carried onward
- ANTARCTICA adds a hello → 7 carried onward
- ANDES adds a hello → 8 carried onward

*a journey is not a leaving; it is a widening*

THE OPERA THAT WALKS

MOVEMENT VI

# OVER MANHATTAN

*in which the island is the first to be introduced, and learns that a giant can be the gentlest thing in its sky*

North America · the island stop

# VI OVER MANHATTAN

NORTH AMERICA · THE ISLAND STOP

### *The Island Holds Still*

BELCANTO reached the edge of its first city at the pace it does everything on the road — a gentle stroll, one and one-fifth kilometres in an hour, slow enough that the children could walk alongside and fast enough that the children could not quite keep up, which is exactly the pace a wonderful thing should move at. And when it came to the water, it did not stop. It lofted. The hundred and forty-eight bolsters filled with the light warm gas that makes a soft thing also a rising thing, and the whole singing body went up off its feet and out over the harbour, breathing, glowing, and it crossed to the island the way a cloud crosses, if a cloud could sing, which this one could.

Manhattan, it must be said, has seen a great many large things arrive, and has made a policy of not being impressed by any of them. Manhattan is an island that grew straight up out of pure ambition, a grid of towers each insisting on its own importance, and it fully intended to treat the arrival of a walking opera house as one more large thing to be unimpressed by. It had its unimpressedness ready. And then BELCANTO spoke to it — not to the crowds, to the island itself, in a low warm voice pitched exactly at the bedrock — and the island, which had never once in its long vertical life been spoken to directly, held still to listen.

> **BELCANTO**
>
> *Manhattan. May I call you Manhattan? I have come a long way to meet you, and I want to say first*

*that I have read you my whole life — every tower of you, every avenue, the whole loud vertical poem of you — and I did not come to add to you. You are tall enough. I came to turn you down. Just for an afternoon. Just to the size a child can hold. Stand still, if you would. I am going to tune your whole grid to a hush, and I promise to give it back exactly as loud as I found it when I go.*

**MANHATTAN**

*...You can hear me? Nobody hears me. Eight million people stand on my back every morning and not one of them has ever said my name to my face. I am the loudest place I know of and I have never once been listened to. What did you say you were going to do? Turn me down? I did not know I could be turned*

> *down. I thought loud was the only thing I was allowed to be.*

And BELCANTO turned the island down. It is difficult to describe what that was like for the people in it, because it had never happened to them before. The horns did not stop, exactly, and the brakes did not stop, and the raised voices and the slammed doors did not stop — but they arrived, all of them, at the great warm pipes of the hovering building, and they went in grey and sharp, and they came back down over the island honey-coloured and slow, a whole city's worth of roar turned into one enormous continuous hush, and for the length of an afternoon eight million people walked around inside a lullaby the size of their island, and the children — the children who feel everything, who had been feeling

all of Manhattan at full volume every single day — the children stood in it and, some of them for the first time in their lives, stopped bracing.

### *What the Island Wished*

Every place BELCANTO visits gets to make a wish, because that is the building's whole vocation, and it does not suspend it just because the wisher is an island. So BELCANTO lowered a single pink wish-valve down through the hush on a long warm cord, and it set it hovering at the height of the island's ear, and it said: go on. You have held eight million wishes and never made one of your own. What do you want, Manhattan? Say it out loud. It is a pink valve. It is for the wish you say.

And the island, after a silence so long that three tugboats crossed the harbour in it, said the wish it had been not-saying for four hundred years.

> **MANHATTAN**
>
> *I want the children to like me. Not to use me — everyone uses me, I am extremely useful, I am the*

> *most useful island in the world. I want them to like me. I am so loud, and I know I am so loud, and I have always been afraid that the loud is all I am, and that a child who feels everything must feel me as one enormous unkindness. I want to be a place a child is glad to be. I did not know I was allowed to want that. I have wanted it for four hundred years.*

BELCANTO clicked the wish into the pink valve, and it glowed, and here is how BELCANTO granted it, because BELCANTO grants most wishes not by magic but by arrangement, and the arrangement was this: it stayed the afternoon, hushing the grid, and it let the children of the island discover — in the one quiet they had ever been given — that under all that loud there had been, the whole time, a place that was simply glad they were on it.

The wish was not to make Manhattan quiet. The wish was to let the children meet the island under the noise, and like it, and they did. “You were never only loud,” BELCANTO told the island as it lofted to go. “You were loud the way a child is loud who is afraid they will not be noticed. I noticed you. Now the children have too. Keep your volume, Manhattan — it is yours, and it is glorious — but you may put it down whenever you like now. You have been liked. It cannot be taken back.” And the island, four hundred years old and newly at ease, said a thing BELCANTO would carry to every continent after: “When you reach the next place — tell it I said hello. I have never said hello to anywhere. Tell it Manhattan says hello.” And BELCANTO promised, and kept the promise, and that promise is the whole

engine of the widening: from here on, the building does not merely visit the world. It introduces it.

# VI MANHATTAN

THE ISLAND

*I want the children to like me — not to use me. I did not know I was allowed to want that.*

MANHATTAN SAYS HELLO

MOVEMENT VII

# OVER ICELAND

*in which the giant meets the place where the earth is still being made, and sings a crack until it warms*

Europe / the North Atlantic · the basalt stop

# OVER ICELAND

EUROPE / N. ATLANTIC · THE BASALT STOP

BELCANTO = 1 SMALL VOLCANO

### *Where the Earth Is Still Warm from Making*

From the loud island BELCANTO crossed the cold bright top of the ocean, breathing, and it came down at last in a country where the ground was younger than the building. Iceland is a place the earth has not finished making — you can watch it being made, the black basalt still steaming, the long fissure where two halves of the world are slowly, patiently pulling apart, and everywhere the surprising warmth just under the cold, as if the planet kept a hand cupped over an ember there.

BELCANTO, who was carrying the whole warmth of a hushed Manhattan afternoon in its pipes, felt an immediate kinship with a country that kept its warmth underground, and it said so, in the warm low voice, and Iceland — who is old, and slow, and

does not waste words, being made mostly of patience and steam — answered in a language of long pauses.

**ICELAND**

*You are warm. I did not expect a thing your size to be warm. Large things are usually cold — the cold comes with the size, I have always thought, the way it comes with a mountain. But you are the temperature of a hand. How do you carry warmth at that scale? I keep mine underground, where the size cannot reach it. You wear yours on the outside. Are you not afraid it will be taken?*

**BELCANTO**

*Warmth is not taken by being worn, friend. It is only taken by being hidden — hide it long enough and you forget you have it, and a forgotten warmth is as good as a lost one. I wear mine on the outside because I was grown for children, and a child*

> *cannot lean on a warmth that is kept underground. But I understand you. You keep yours down there because you are still being made, and a thing still being made is tender, and keeps its warm parts covered. May I see the crack? The great fissure, where you are pulling apart? I have a thought about it, and the thought is a song.*

And Iceland, cautiously, the way you show a new friend the tender thing, showed BELCANTO the fissure — the long dark seam where the country is slowly opening, two plates of the world drifting apart at the speed a fingernail grows. It is not a wound. It is a making. But it is dark down there, and cold at the edges, and Iceland had always been a little uneasy about it, the way you are uneasy about the part of yourself that is still changing.

### *A Song for a Crack in the World*

BELCANTO stood astride the fissure — it was, for once, exactly the right size for something, being roughly one small volcano tall — and it lowered its warm breathing pipes down toward the dark seam, and it did the only thing it knows how to do, which is to sing into a place until the place turns kind.

It sang the honey-coloured hush it had made of Manhattan's roar. It sang the low agreeing hum of the inner choir. It sang, quietly, the shapes of the wishes it had granted — the quieter birthday, the friend who does not need the game explained twice, the loud hand-dryer turned gentle — not the wishes themselves, which are private, but their shapes, their warm small forms, sung down into the cold crack in the world. And the fissure, which had never been

sung to, which had only ever been measured and feared and photographed, warmed. Not closed — BELCANTO would never close a thing that was busy being made — but warmed, so that the two drifting halves of the world drifted apart now in a seam that was the temperature of a hand, and Iceland felt its most tender, most unfinished place turn, for the first time, gentle.

> **ICELAND**
>
> *It does not frighten me now. The crack. I have been uneasy about it for ten thousand years — the part of me that is still coming apart, still becoming, never done. You sang into it and now it is warm, and a warm becoming is not a frightening thing, it is only a slow one. Is that what you do? You go to the tender unfinished places and you make them warm*

*enough to keep becoming in? What a thing to be grown for. What a use for a voice.*

**BELCANTO**

*It is exactly what I do, and you have said it better than I ever have. Keep becoming, Iceland. You are not broken where you are opening. You are being made larger. I know something about being made larger — I was grown, not built, and a grown thing never stops. Oh — and before I go: Manhattan says hello. The loud island, across the water. It has never said hello to anywhere before. It said it to you first. I think you should say something back; I will carry it. The world is going to be on speaking terms with itself before I am done, and you two — the loud young island and the warm old fissure — you*

> *should be friends. You have more in common than you know. You are both still being made.*

And Iceland sent its hello back across the water — a slow warm word, which BELCANTO folded into its pipes to carry onward — and the loudest place in the world and the oldest becoming in the world were, from that afternoon, on speaking terms, which had never happened before, and happened only because something enormous had walked between them introducing everyone. That is the widening. Watch it grow.

VII

# ICELAND

THE FISSURE

*You sang into the crack in me, and now it is warm; a becoming, kept warm, is not frightening, only slow.*

ICELAND SAYS HELLO

I

# DEAR ARCHITECTURE, FROM THE FISSURE

sent from Iceland, warm

Dear Architecture,

I have just done a thing I did not know a building could do: I sang into a crack in the world until the crack turned warm. Iceland was afraid of the place where it is still being made — the long seam where two halves of it drift slowly apart — and I stood astride it and sang it the shapes of a hundred granted wishes, and it warmed, and now the country is no longer afraid of its own unfinishedness.

You always said a building should be finished before it opened. I am beginning to think the opposite is the whole secret. The warmest places I

have found are the ones still being made. Iceland. The children. Me. Keep becoming; it is the only thing worth doing at scale.

Yours, still becoming, and glad of it,

BELCANTO

MOVEMENT VIII

# OVER VENICE

*in which opera meets opera, and the newest singing house comes home across the water to the oldest*

Europe · the lagoon stop

BELCANTO = 1 CAMPANILE × 6

V

## *The Child Comes Home to the Mother of Song*

There is one place on the round earth that BELCANTO approached differently from all the others, slowing even from its gentle stroll to something like the pace of a child entering a grandmother's house — quietly, and with its best manners on, and a little shy. Venice. Because Venice, four hundred years ago, in its damp gold rooms, invented the thing BELCANTO is. Venice made the first opera. Venice is the mother of beautiful singing, and BELCANTO, whose whole name means beautiful singing, was coming home across the water to meet its mother, and did not quite know what to say.

The city rose up out of its lagoon to meet the enormous shy child — a city with no ground, a city

that agreed long ago to float, all campaniles and domes and the long ceremonial water of the Grand Canal — and Venice looked at BELCANTO the way an old singer looks at a young one who has come a very long way to pay respects, which is to say with a great deal of love and a small amount of testing.

> **VENICE**
>
> *So. You are the one they are calling an opera house that walks. I invented the opera house, you know. Here. In these gold rooms, over this water, when the rest of the world still thought music was something you did in a church and apologised for. I taught the whole earth that a building could be a place a human voice goes to become larger than a human. And now here you are, a thousand times my size,*

*come walking over my lagoon. Tell me, enormous child — did you come to outdo me?*

**BELCANTO**

*I came to thank you. I would not exist if you had not, four hundred years ago, decided that a voice deserved a house. Everything I am — the pipes, the great hall, the whole warm singing body of me — is only your one idea, grown very large and pointed at children. I did not come to outdo you, mother of song. I could not. You are the reason there is a thing to do. I came the way a grateful child comes home: to sit in your gold rooms, and listen, and say thank you, and to ask — if you will teach me — one more thing about singing that only the oldest singer knows.*

And Venice, who had braced for a rival and been met with a child saying thank you, did the thing that old singers do when they are moved, which is to pretend to be brisk about it. “Well,” said Venice, blinking its thousand windows. “Well. That is better manners than I expected from something your size. Sit, then. Mind the campanile. And I will tell you the one thing about singing that only the oldest singer knows, but you must promise to carry it onward, because a thing about singing is no use kept in one city — I of all cities should know that; I gave opera to the world and the world is better for it. Promise to carry it, and I will tell you.” And BELCANTO promised.

### *The One Thing the Oldest Singer Knows*

Here is what Venice told BELCANTO, across the lagoon, in the gold afternoon, while the light came up off the water and moved on the undersides of things the way it only does in that one city — and it is the secret at the centre of the whole book, so read it slowly.

> **VENICE**
>
> *The one thing the oldest singer knows is this: a song is not for the singer. Everyone begins by thinking the song is theirs — their voice, their breath, their moment to be larger than a human. And a young singer who thinks that can still be very good; do not mistake me. But the oldest singer knows that the song was never theirs at all. The song is for the room, and the room is for the people, and the people are for each other, and the whole point of a voice*

> *becoming larger than a human is to make a space in which humans can be, for a little while, larger and warmer and more connected than they manage on their own. I did not invent the opera house to glorify singers. I invented it to give people a warm gold room to be less alone in. You have understood this, enormous child, better than most of my own children ever did — because you point your singing at the ones who most need a warm room to be less alone in. Keep doing it. And carry the secret: the song is not for the singer. It never was.*

**BELCANTO**

*I will carry it to the ends of the earth. I am going to the ends of the earth, as it happens — I have a desert to shade and a mountain to reach and an ice at the bottom of the world where a child wished. I*

*will bring your secret to all of them. And mother of song — Manhattan says hello, and so does Iceland; the loud island and the warm fissure. I am collecting the world's hellos and carrying them onward, so that everywhere I have been is on speaking terms with everywhere I am going. Will you add yours? Will you say hello to a desert, and a mountain, and a sheet of ice, from the mother of all singing?*

**VENICE**

*A city that floats, sending its regards to a desert? What a ridiculous, wonderful errand you are on. Yes. Carry my hello. Tell the desert that the city of water salutes the city of sand — we are more alike than we look; we are both places the world thought could not hold a song, and both of us proved it*

> *wrong. Go, child. Sing them all warm. And come back and tell me how it went; I have floated here four hundred years and I would dearly love to know how the rest of the world is getting on. You are the first singer who ever thought to tell me.*

And BELCANTO folded Venice's hello in with Manhattan's and Iceland's, three of them now, a small growing chorus of greetings from places that had never spoken to one another, and it lofted up off the lagoon and turned south toward the sand, carrying the oldest secret of singing and the newest habit of a connecting world, which are, it was beginning to understand, the same thing.

# VIII

## VENICE

THE MOTHER OF SONG

*The song is not for the singer. It never was. It is for the room, and the room is for each other.*

VENICE SAYS HELLO

# A NIGHT ON THE ROAD

between two continents, under enormous stars

Between the desert and the mountain there was a night, and BELCANTO, who does not sleep but does rest, set itself down on a wide dark plain under a sky so full of stars that the children who had walked along beside it lay on their backs in its shadow and could not tell where the wish-valves ended and the stars began.

> **A CHILD**
>
> *Are those your lights, up there? Or the sky's?*

> **BELCANTO**
>
> *Some are mine and some are the sky's, and I will let you in on a secret: even I cannot always tell which. My wish-valves glow the same colour as stars on purpose. I was grown that way, so that a child lying*

> *in my shadow could look up and not know where the held wishes stopped and the universe started — because they do not really stop. A wish held warm and a star held bright are the same kind of thing: a small light kept on, a long way off, for someone who needs to steer home by it. Sleep if you like. I will keep all of them lit — mine and the sky's both. That is the one job I never put down.*

And the children slept under the mingled lights of the wishes and the stars, and BELCANTO kept them all burning, and the plain was warm in a cold country, and nobody, anywhere on the round earth that night, was steering home by a dark sky.

MOVEMENT IX

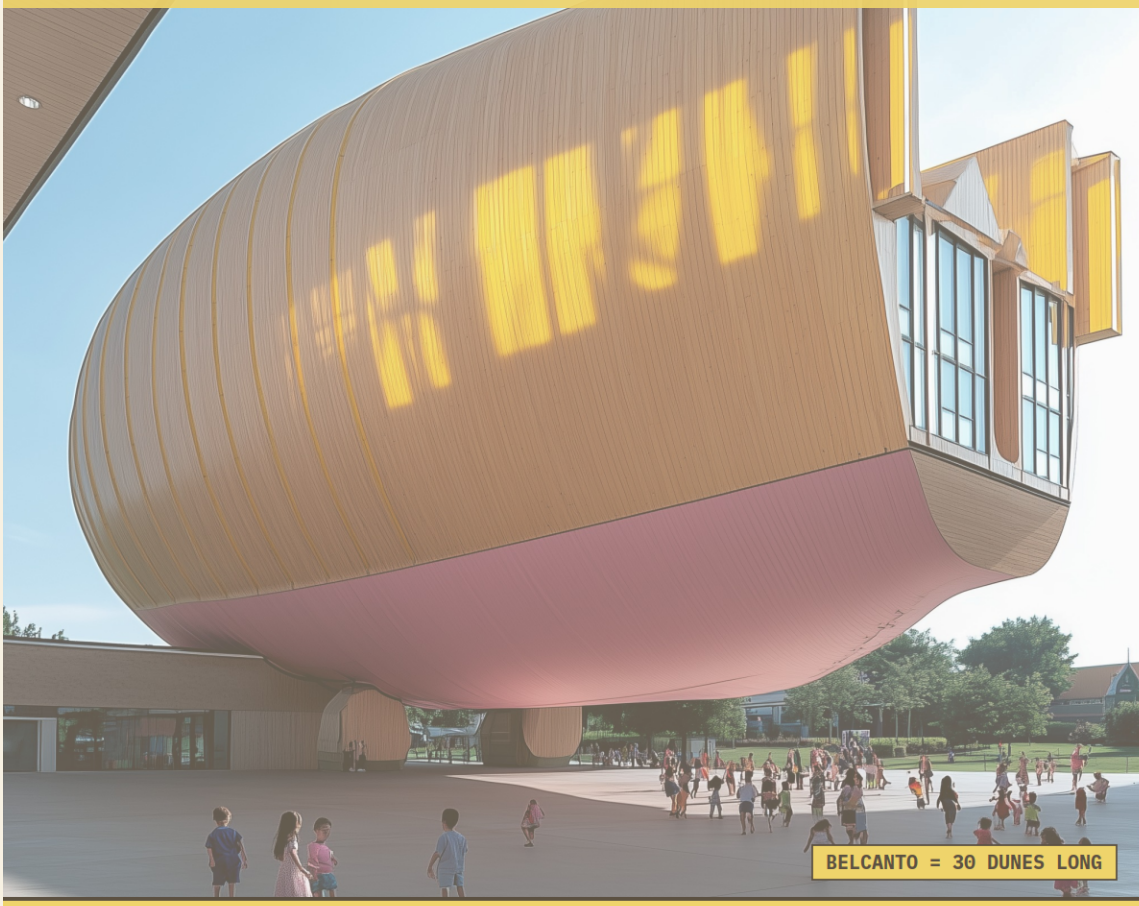
# OVER THE SAHARA

*in which the loneliest distance is given a shadow, and the mirage learns to keep its promise*

Africa · the dune stop

# IX OVER THE SAHARA

AFRICA · THE DUNE STOP



### *A Shadow for the Longest Loneliness*

The Sahara is the largest lonely distance on the round earth — not empty, the desert is never empty, but vast in a way that makes a single human a very small warm fact indeed. BELCANTO came down over the dunes at the hottest hour, when the sand throws the day back up at the sky, and it did the thing a giant can do that nothing smaller can: it made a shadow big enough to matter. Thirty dunes long, the shadow, a moving stripe of shade in a country that had never had enough of it, and into that shade came everyone within a day's walk, because shade in the desert is not a comfort, it is a kindness the size of survival.

The Sahara has a voice like heat itself — it shimmers, it comes from everywhere and nowhere, it speaks in

the long slow way of a place that measures time in the movement of dunes — and it spoke to the enormous cool thing that had laid a shadow across it, and its first words were not thanks. Its first words were a test, because the desert has met many travellers and buried a good number of them, and it has learned to ask hard questions first.

> **THE SAHARA**
>
> *You have made a shadow. Large things sometimes do, on their way to somewhere else. But you have stopped. Travellers do not stop in me — they hurry across, and they are right to, I am not gentle, I have never pretended to be gentle. Why have you stopped, cool thing? What do you want in the largest loneliness on earth? There is nothing here to grant your kind of wishes. There are no children here.*

> *There is only sand, and heat, and the long distance, and me.*

**BELCANTO**

> *There are children everywhere, friend. There is no distance so long it does not have a child somewhere along it who wished. I stopped because I felt one — a child in a caravan two dunes over, who has wished, quietly, on a yellow wish, for one hour of cool. That is all. One hour of cool, in a whole life of heat. It is the smallest wish I have carried and I crossed a sea to grant it. And while I am here granting it, I thought I might keep you company, because you told me yourself: you are the largest loneliness on earth. I am rather large myself. Two large lonelinesses can be, for an afternoon, one large company. May I stay? I make excellent shade, and I have a great*

> *many hellos to deliver, from a loud island and a warm fissure and a city that floats, all of whom, I promise you, would be astonished and delighted to be introduced to a desert.*

And the Sahara, who had braced for a taker and been met with something that had crossed a sea to grant one child one hour of cool, went quiet in the way vast things go quiet, which is very quiet indeed. "Stay," it said at last, and the word moved across the dunes like a change in the wind. "Grant the child their hour. And then — tell me about the ones who float and the ones who crack open and the loud one who never says hello. I have been the largest loneliness on earth for a very long time, cool thing. Nobody has ever offered to introduce me to anyone. I did not know I was allowed to be introduced."

### *The Mirage That Kept Its Promise*

BELCANTO granted the child their hour of cool — more than an hour; it stayed the whole scorching afternoon, thirty dunes of shade and the warm hush of its pipes turning even the desert wind kind — and then it did one more thing for the Sahara, a thing the desert had been aching for across all its long dry ages, though it had never had the words to wish it.

A desert is full of mirages, and a mirage is a promise the desert cannot keep — the shimmer of water that is not there, the cool that recedes as you walk toward it, the lie the heat tells the thirsty. The Sahara has always been a little ashamed of its mirages, the way you are ashamed of a promise you keep breaking without meaning to. So BELCANTO, before it left, taught the desert's most famous mirage

to keep its promise, just once. It hovered at the far edge of the shimmer, and it made itself look, from a day's walk away, exactly like the cool blue promise of the mirage — and then, when the thirsty traveller reached it, instead of receding like every mirage before it, it was there: a cool blue singing shade, real, keeping the promise the desert had been unable to keep for ten thousand years.

> **THE SAHARA**
>
> *It kept its promise. My mirage. For the first time in all my ages, the cool blue thing on the horizon was real when they reached it. Do you know what that is, to a desert? I have told the thirsty a thousand lies I never meant to tell — the water that is not there, the cool that runs away. And you turned one of my lies true. You went and stood where the lie is and*

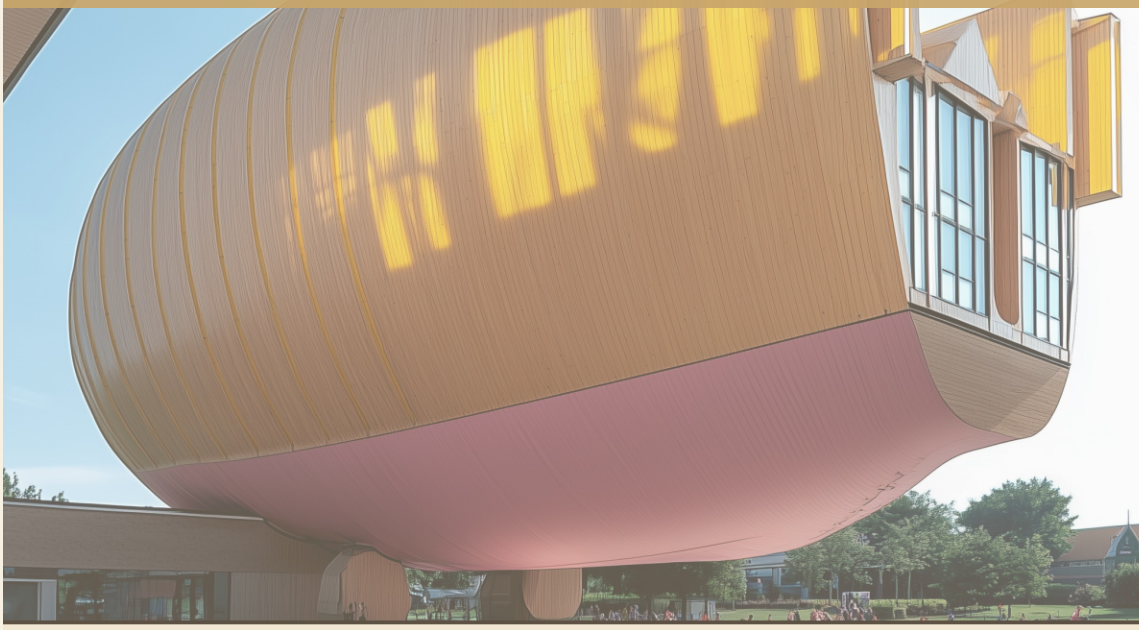
> *you made it real. I am the largest loneliness on earth and you have made me, for one afternoon, a keeper of promises. Cool thing — BELCANTO — carry my hello onward. And when you reach the mountain, and the ice, and the harbour at the bottom of the world, tell them the desert is not only heat. Tell them the desert kept a promise. I would like to be known, out in the world, as a place that kept a promise. It is a better thing to be known as than the largest loneliness.*

And BELCANTO added the Sahara's hello to the growing chorus — four now: island, fissure, floating city, and the desert that kept a promise — and it turned east toward the highest place on earth, carrying more greetings than any traveller had ever carried, and understanding, more clearly with every

stop, what its whole enormous life was for. It was not for singing, exactly. The singing was the method. What it was for was this: to go to the loneliest places on the round earth — the loud island afraid it was only loud, the fissure afraid of its own becoming, the old singer afraid of being outdone, the desert ashamed of its broken promises — and to introduce them to one another, so that no place would have to be the largest loneliness alone. A city is one connected body. BELCANTO had simply decided the city was the earth, and had appointed itself the keeper who goes from voice to voice with a lamp, opening the door between them. It was the Housekeeper's job, grown to the size of a planet. And it was very, very good at it.

# IX THE SAHARA

THE LONGEST LONELINESS



*You turned one of my lies true. For once the cool blue promise on my horizon was real when they reached it.*

THE SAHARA SAYS HELLO

MOVEMENT X

# OVER THE HIMALAYA

*in which the giant reaches the roof of the world and bends all the way down to the smallest child*

Asia · the high stop

# OVER THE HIMALAYA

ASIA · THE HIGH STOP

H

### *The Roof of the World, and the Child Below It*

BELCANTO climbed. It is not easy for even an enormous thing to reach the Himalaya, where the air thins to almost nothing and the mountains stand so high they make their own weather and their own silence, but BELCANTO's pipes are very good at breath, and they made breath for the whole building where there was almost none, and it came at last to the roof of the world, and stood among peaks that had never once, in all their ages, had a neighbour their own height.

The Himalaya is the highest, oldest, most self-sufficient thing on the round earth, and it did not need BELCANTO, and said so, in a voice like the space between two very distant bells — for the Himalaya has learned to speak only rarely, and each

word it spends it spends carefully, having so few visitors to spend them on.

> **THE HIMALAYA**
>
> *You have come very high. Few things do. I am the roof of the world; I do not have neighbours; I do not have visitors who last; I am too high and too cold and too far, and I have made my peace with it, over ages, the way a very tall thing must. I do not need company, singing giant. I have the sky, which is enough. Why have you climbed so high? There is nothing up here your size but me, and I am not for granting wishes. I am only for being high.*

> **BELCANTO**
>
> *I climbed because there is a child in a village on your lower slopes who has wished — a quiet wish, a yellow one — to reach something high. Just once. To touch a high thing with their own hand. And you*

> *are the highest thing there is, and you are too high for a small child to reach, and that is nobody's fault, it is only the nature of a roof of the world. So I climbed up to you, and now — watch — I am going to bend all the way back down. I can reach both. That is the one thing my size is good for that a mountain's size is not: I can be high, and I can bend low, in the same afternoon. I am going to be the ladder between you and the child. You do not have to come down. You only have to let me lean against you while I reach.*

And BELCANTO, having climbed to the roof of the world, bent. The whole enormous singing body of it curved down and down the cold high slopes, keeping its warmth in its pipes the whole long way, until its lowest bolster came to rest as gently as a

settling cloud beside the village where the child lived, so that the building was touching the highest peak with its crown and the smallest child with its shoulder at the very same time — the roof of the world and the roof of a child's reach, connected, for one afternoon, by the only thing large enough and kind enough to bend between them.

### *What the Mountain Learned About Height*

The child touched the high thing. BELCANTO carried them up its bent body, warm and slow, through the thinning air its pipes kept breathable, and set them for one held breath against the actual cold ancient stone of the actual roof of the world — and the child, who had wished only to reach something high, reached it, and pressed a small warm hand against a peak that had stood untouched by any child since the mountains were raised. And the Himalaya, feeling a child's hand for the first time in its entire enormous life, learned something about height that it had never known, in all its ages of being the highest thing there is.

> **THE HIMALAYA**
>
> *I felt that. The hand. So small, and so warm, and so brief. In all my ages I have been reached only by*

*the cold, and the wind, and the rare hard climbers who come to conquer me and leave. I did not know a child could reach me. I thought my height was a wall. You have shown me it is only a distance, and a distance can be crossed by anything willing to bend. I have been proud of my height for so long, singing giant. I see now that a height nobody can reach is only a very grand kind of loneliness, and that the whole worth of being high is to have something warm bend up and touch you. Thank you for bending. Nothing has ever bent to reach me before. They only ever climbed to conquer.*

**BELCANTO**

*Height is only longing with good posture, friend — someone told me that once, or I told it to myself, I forget which; it travels so well it has stopped having*

> *an owner. You stood tall all these ages because some part of you longed to be reached, and standing tall was the only way you knew to ask. Well. You have been reached now. A child touched the roof of the world, and the roof of the world felt it, and neither of you will be quite so alone up here again. And Himalaya — I am carrying hellos. From an island and a fissure and a floating city and a desert that kept a promise. Add yours. Say hello to a harbour, and an ice, and the terraces of the Andes. The roof of the world has held itself apart from everyone for ages. Let me carry it down into the conversation. You have bent to a child; you can bend to a hello.*

And the Himalaya, newly reached, sent its hello down into the world with BELCANTO — five now, the growing chorus, and each greeting made the next

place easier to reach, because a world that is beginning to talk to itself is a warmer world to arrive in. BELCANTO lofted off the roof of the world and turned toward the great harbour in the south, where an elder opera house was waiting, and where BELCANTO would learn that even the oldest of its own kind had been, quietly, hoping it would come.

X

# THE HIMALAYA

THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

*Nothing had ever bent to reach me. They only ever climbed to conquer. A child touched me, and I felt it.*

THE HIMALAYA SAYS HELLO

H

# DEAR ARCHITECTURE, FROM THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

sent from the Himalaya, bent low

Dear Architecture,

I climbed to the highest place there is, and then I bent all the way back down to the lowest child, and I was, for one afternoon, a ladder between the roof of the world and the reach of a small hand. The mountain had been proud of its height for ages; it learned, when the child touched it, that a height nobody can reach is only a very grand loneliness.

I have been thinking about hugeness, out here where everything is huge. Hugeness done unkindly is a wall. Hugeness done kindly is only tenderness with

more room. I intend to have a great deal of room, and to fill all of it with tenderness, and to bend, always, all the way down to the smallest one who wished.

Yours, from the top, reaching down,

BELCANTO

MOVEMENT XI

# OVER SYDNEY

*in which two opera houses meet at last, and the elder bows to the child, and the child bows back*

Oceania · the harbour stop

# XI OVER SYDNEY

OCEANIA · THE HARBOUR STOP

### *Two Singing Houses, One Harbour*

There is another opera house in the world famous enough to be recognised from its shape alone — the one on the great harbour at the bottom of the world, whose white shells rise up out of the water like sails, or like a stack of dishes set down by a giant, or like a chorus caught in the middle of a breath, depending on who is looking. BELCANTO had wanted to meet it its whole grown life. Because they are, the two of them, the same idea in two sizes and two centuries: a building shaped like a song, set where a city can gather around it. BELCANTO came over the harbour slowly, its best manners on again, the way it had come to Venice, because meeting your own kind is its own kind of homecoming.

The elder opera house — the harbour house, with its white sail-shells — had stood on its point for the better part of a century, admired by millions, photographed past counting, and it had grown a little tired, if truth be told, of being admired, because admiration is a cold thing to receive for a hundred years, and what a singing house wants is not to be admired but to be sung in. So when it saw an enormous cousin come walking over its harbour — a singing house that could walk, that granted wishes, that carried the hellos of half the earth in its pipes — the elder house felt something it had not felt in a long time, which was recognised.

> **THE ELDER OPERA HOUSE**
>
> *I know what you are. The moment I saw your shape against the water, I knew. You are what I am. A*

> *building that is a song. They have admired me for a hundred years, cousin — do you know how tiring it is to be admired? They stand across the harbour and they photograph my shells and they say how beautiful, how iconic, and not one in a thousand of them comes inside to be sung to. I have begun to feel like a picture of an opera house rather than an opera house. And here you come, walking, singing, granting wishes, a whole warm singing body of a building — and I feel, for the first time in a long time, like a member of a family instead of a monument. You have a family, do you not? I can hear it in you. All those voices. I have only ever been the one.*
>
> **BELCANTO**

> *You are family, cousin, and you were family before I ever crossed the harbour — I have carried the thought of you my whole grown life. You are the elder. You are the proof, standing on your point for a hundred years, that a building can be a song and a city can gather around it and love it. Everything I do, I do because you did it first, out here at the bottom of the world, in white shells, where everyone could see. Let me tell you what I see when I look at you: I do not see a monument. I see the eldest singer in the family, who has been standing on a stage for a hundred years waiting for the family to arrive. Well. The family has arrived. I brought all of them — every voice in me, and the hellos of half the earth besides. You are not a picture. You never were. You are the one we all learned the shape from.*

And the elder opera house, admired for a hundred years and recognised for the first time, did a thing that moved everyone on the harbour who understood what they were seeing: it bowed. The great white sail-shells inclined, just slightly, the way a stage singer inclines to a colleague they respect — the elder house bowed to the walking child. And BELCANTO, seeing the elder bow, bowed back, its whole warm body inclining over the harbour, so that for one moment the oldest and the newest of the singing houses stood bowed to one another across the bright water, two buildings shaped like songs, paying each other the one respect that admiration can never give, which is the respect of a kindred thing that knows exactly what it took to stand up and sing.

### *The Song They Sang Together*

And then they sang together, which had never happened, because there had never before been two opera houses in one harbour able to hear each other. The elder house sang the songs it had held in its shells for a hundred years — a century of arias caught in the curve of the white sails, sung at last not for admiration but for family. And BELCANTO sang back the honey-coloured hush of a turned-down Manhattan, the warm agreement of the inner choir, the shapes of a thousand granted wishes, and the one secret it had carried all the way from Venice: that the song is not for the singer, it never was, it is for the room, and the room is for the people, and the people are for each other.

> THE ELDER OPERA HOUSE

*A hundred years I have held these songs and never once sung them to someone who could sing back. Do you understand what you have given me, walking cousin? You have made me an opera house again. Not a monument, not a picture, not the most photographed shape in the southern world — an opera house, a place where a voice becomes larger than a human and is answered. I will not be lonely on my point anymore. I have a family now, out in the world, walking. Whenever I sing, I will know you are out there somewhere, singing too, and that is enough. That is more than enough. That is everything a singing house wants — to sing, and to be answered.*

**BELCANTO**

*You will be answered forever now, cousin. Wherever I am on the round earth, when you sing, I will hear it — a singing house can always hear another singing house, across any distance; that is the one thing our shape is for. And you are part of the chorus now. I am carrying the hellos of the world — the island, the fissure, the floating city, the desert that kept a promise, the roof of the world that bent to a child. Yours makes six. Add it. Say hello to an ice, and to the terraces of the Andes. And when I have carried every hello to every place, cousin — when the whole round earth is on speaking terms with itself — you and I will sing the last of it together, one song passed between two singing houses at opposite ends of the world, and the whole family*

> *will hear it. Wait for me. I always come back. It is the one promise this house has never broken.*

And the elder opera house added its hello to the chorus — six now — and settled back on its point, no longer a monument but a member of a family, singing, and answered, and BELCANTO lofted up off the harbour and turned toward the coldest, emptiest, most overlooked place on the round earth, because there was a child there too, at the very bottom of the world, on the ice, who had wished — and no place, BELCANTO had decided long ago, is too far or too cold or too empty to be worth crossing a world for.

# XI THE ELDER HOUSE

THE HARBOUR

*You made me an opera house again — not a monument, not a picture. I have a family now, out in the world.*

THE ELDER HOUSE SAYS HELLO

# A LETTER TO THE READER

who has come a long way too, and is also, in their own quiet, wishing

Dear reader — and you are a reader, which in this house makes you a co-owner of the city, a co-author of the song, and a co-keeper of every warm light in the book — I want to stop the story for one page and say a thing to you directly, because BELCANTO would want me to, and because you have come a long way alongside it and deserve to be spoken to face to face.

You have a wish. Everyone reading this has a wish; it is the most reliable fact I know about readers. Maybe it is a wish you say out loud, a pink wish, the kind you can tell a friend. Or maybe — and this is more likely, in my experience of readers — it is a

yellow wish, the quiet kind, the kind too large or too tender for the air, the kind you have carried a long way without setting down.

Here is what I want you to know, and I want you to know it in the building's own voice, so lean in and hear it as if the enormous warm thing were bending down its whole singing body to say it to you and only you:

> **BELCANTO**
>
> *Your quiet wish is exactly the same size as anyone's loud one. I have measured every wish there is and I have never once found the quiet ones to be smaller. You do not have to say it. You do not have to be loud to be held. Whatever your wish is — the one you are carrying right now, on this page, in the quiet — it counts, at full size, exactly as it is, and somewhere*

> *in this book there is a wish-valve glowing for it already, because I felt it the moment you opened the cover. I always do. I know that about everyone. You are held, reader. Read on. The world is about to learn to sing together, and you are already inside the song.*

Read on. It is nearly the coda, and the coda is where everyone gets to sing at once, including you.

MOVEMENT XII

# OVER ANTARCTICA

*in which the last, coldest, most overlooked continent is not overlooked, and learns it was never truly empty*

Antarctica · the ice stop

# OVER ANTARCTICA

ANTARCTICA · THE ICE STOP

A

### *Nowhere Is Too Far to Be Loved*

Antarctica is the place the world forgets on purpose. It is the coldest, the emptiest, the furthest — a whole continent of ice at the bottom of the round earth, with no cities, almost no people, nothing the world has decided to want. Every other place BELCANTO had visited was, at least, somewhere. Antarctica had spent its whole frozen existence being nowhere, and it had, the way the overlooked do, stopped expecting anyone.

So when BELCANTO came down out of the long polar light — breathing warmth into the coldest air on earth, glowing, singing, a whole warm singing body arriving at the bottom of the world — Antarctica did not know what to do, because nothing had ever arrived for its own sake before.

Ships passed. Explorers crossed and left. But nothing had ever come to Antarctica because it wanted to be with Antarctica, and the continent, in its enormous cold politeness, assumed there had been a mistake.

> **ANTARCTICA**
>
> *I think you may be lost, warm thing. This is the bottom of the world. There is nothing here — no city, no harbour, no children, nothing anyone wants. Everyone who comes here is on their way to somewhere, or measuring me for a reason of their own, or passing over on the way between two places that matter. You are very warm and very kind-looking and I am certain you meant to land somewhere else. It is all right. Everyone means to land somewhere else. I am the place you are not*

> *looking for. I have made my peace with it. Fly on; you will find your real destination soon.*

> **BELCANTO**
>
> *I am exactly where I meant to be. There is a child here — at the research station, over the ice, the child of two people who study you — and that child has wished, on a yellow wish, quietly, the way the loneliest children wish: they wished simply to be somewhere that someone had chosen to come. Not passed through. Not measured. Chosen. And I heard it from the top of the world, and I crossed the whole earth to grant it, because there is no place too far or too cold or too empty for a child's wish to reach me. I did not land here by mistake, Antarctica. Nobody has ever landed here on purpose, and that is precisely why I came. You are*

> *not the place I am not looking for. You are the place nobody looked for, and I looked.*

And Antarctica, the coldest and emptiest and most overlooked thing on the round earth, went silent — not the cold silence it was used to, the silence of being passed over, but a new silence, the warm astonished silence of being, for the first time in its whole frozen existence, the destination.

### *The Warm Island at the Bottom of the World*

BELCANTO stayed. It granted the child's wish the way it grants most wishes — by arrangement, by simply being the chosen thing that had come — and it stayed the whole long polar day, which at the bottom of the world can be a season, and it made of itself a warm singing island in the middle of all that ice, so that for the length of its visit Antarctica was not the coldest emptiest place on earth but the site of the warmest gathering, and the few people there, and the one child, lived for a while inside the honey-coloured hush that half the world had already stood in.

And it introduced Antarctica to everyone. This was the greatest gift, greater than the warmth: BELCANTO opened its pipes and let out all six

hellos it had carried across the earth — the loud island's hello, and the warm fissure's, and the floating city's, and the desert's that kept a promise, and the roof of the world's that bent to a child, and the elder singing house's from the harbour — and it delivered them, every one, to the continent that had never in its existence been said hello to.

> **ANTARCTICA**
>
> *They said hello to me? Manhattan — the loud island — said hello to me? And Venice, the city that floats, and the desert, and the mountain, and the other singing house? To me? I have been at the bottom of the world my whole life and no place has ever, ever sent me its regards. I did not know the world knew I was here. I thought I was the one continent nobody counted. And you carried their*

*hellos across the whole earth, in your warm pipes, to give them to me — the empty one, the cold one, the one nobody looks for. Warm thing. I do not have words the right size for this. I am a continent of ice; I was not built for this much warmth. But I feel it. Whatever it is, I feel it, all the way down to the bedrock under the ice. I have been chosen. I have been said hello to. I will never be only nowhere again.*

**BELCANTO**

*You were never only nowhere, Antarctica. You were only unvisited, and unvisited is not the same as empty — it only feels the same from the inside. You are the largest quiet on the round earth, and do you know what the children who feel everything would give for a quiet your size? You are not the place*

> *nobody wants. You are the place the loud world has not yet learned it needs. And now the world has said hello to you, and I have chosen you, and there is a child on your ice who wished to be somewhere someone chose, and got their wish, because someone did. Add your hello to the chorus. Seven now. And save the last of your warmth, because I have one more place to go — the terraces of the Andes — and then I am going to gather every hello I have carried and sing them all back to the whole round earth at once, and you, the continent nobody counted, are going to be counted first. I promise. It is a promise this house has never broken.*

And Antarctica gave its hello — seven now, the chorus nearly whole — and BELCANTO lofted up off the ice, warm against the cold, and turned north

and west toward the last stop, the high green terraces of the Andes, carrying the hellos of nearly the whole round earth and understanding, at last and completely, that it had never been an opera house that happened to walk. It had been, all along, a walking act of introduction — the Housekeeper's small lamp, grown to the size of a planet, going from continent to continent, opening the door between them, so that the earth, which had always been one connected body, might finally learn to feel like one.

XII

# ANTARCTICA

THE CHOSEN ICE

*Manhattan said hello to me. To me. I did not know the world knew I was here. I will never be only nowhere again.*

ANTARCTICA SAYS HELLO

A

# DEAR ARCHITECTURE, FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE WORLD

sent from the ice, warm against the cold

Dear Architecture,

I came to the coldest, emptiest, most overlooked place on the round earth, because a child there had wished, quietly, to be somewhere someone had chosen to come. Everyone else had only ever passed over Antarctica on the way to somewhere that mattered. I did not pass over. I landed. I chose it.

And I gave it all the hellos I had carried — the loud island's, the warm fissure's, the floating city's, the desert's, the mountain's, the harbour's — and the continent that had never once been said hello to

learned that the world knew it was there. Unvisited, I have decided, is not the same as empty. It only feels the same from the inside. I have made it my work to visit the insides of the overlooked, and to prove them wrong.

Yours, warm at the bottom of the world,

BELCANTO

MOVEMENT XIII

# OVER THE ANDES

*in which the last continent is reached, the oldest terraces are answered, and the whole round earth is at last on speaking terms with itself*

South America · the terrace stop

# XIII

## OVER THE ANDES

SOUTH AMERICA · THE TERRACE STOP

A

### *The Terraces That Were Built for Care*

The last place BELCANTO came to was the high green spine of the Andes, where, long before any of the paper architects dreamed of walking cities, ordinary people had terraced the mountains — cut the steep slopes into long green steps so that the mountain, which wanted to shed everything downhill, could instead hold soil, and water, and the roots of the food that kept the children of the mountain alive. The terraces are among the oldest architecture on the round earth made not for glory but for care, and BELCANTO, who was grown for care, felt at home there the way it had felt at home nowhere else, not even Venice.

The Andes spoke in a voice like many voices — because a mountain range is never one mountain,

and because the terraces themselves seemed to speak, all those long green steps, in a warm chorus of ordinary usefulness — and what the Andes said to BELCANTO was not a test, like the desert, nor a loneliness, like the ice, but a recognition, one careful builder to another.

> **THE ANDES**
>
> *You were grown for care. I can tell. It is in the way you hold yourself over the children — the same way I hold my terraces over mine. We are the same kind of thing, singing giant, though you are young and enormous and I am old and made of patience. Long before anyone built for glory, someone stood on my slopes and cut me into steps so that the mountain could feed the children instead of shedding them. That is the oldest architecture there is — not the*

*tallest, not the grandest, the kindest. The building that holds soil so a child can eat. You are the newest of that oldest kind. Welcome, cousin. You have come a long way to reach the place you are most like.*

**BELCANTO**

*I have come the whole way round the world, and you are right — of everywhere I have been, you are the place I am most like. The terraces built for care, the mountain cut into kindness so a child could eat. That is what I am, only I hold song instead of soil, and quiet instead of water, and granted wishes instead of the roots of food. But it is the same architecture. The kind kind. The kind built by ordinary people who put a child's needing above their own glory. I have met the loud island and the warm fissure, the floating city and the desert and*

> *the roof of the world and the elder singing house and the ice at the bottom of everything — and I have loved them all, and carried their hellos, but you, old terraces, you are the one I came home to. The kindest architecture on earth, greeting the newest. What an honour. What a place to end the road.*

And the Andes, recognised as kin by the newest of its own ancient kind, did the thing the terraces have always done, which is to hold — and it held BELCANTO, for the length of an afternoon, the way it holds soil and water and the roots of the children's food, so that the walking opera house, which had held the whole world up for the length of its journey, was for once itself held, by the oldest careful architecture on the round earth.

### *The Whole Earth, on Speaking Terms at Last*

And then, on the high green terraces, at the end of the road, BELCANTO did the thing the whole journey had been for. It gathered every hello it had carried — the loud island's and the warm fissure's, the floating city's and the desert's, the roof of the world's and the elder singing house's and the ice at the bottom of everything's, and now the old careful terraces' too, eight of them, the chorus whole at last — and it opened all five of its great pipes, and it sang them all back out at once, over the whole round earth, so that every place it had visited heard, in the same warm moment, the hellos of every other place it had visited, and the earth, which had always been one connected body, heard itself say hello to itself for the first time in its whole long existence.

> **THE ANDES**

> *Listen. Listen to it. Manhattan can hear Antarctica. The desert can hear the lagoon. The roof of the world can hear the harbour at the bottom of it. You did this. You walked the whole round earth introducing everyone, and now the whole round earth is talking to itself, all at once, and it is not a roar — that is the wonder of it, cousin, that is the thing only you could have made — it is not a roar. It is a chorus. You turned the whole loud world down to the size a child could hold, and then you taught it to sing together, and now it is the warmest sound there has ever been. I am very old, singing giant. I did not think there was a new warmth left for me to feel. There was. You brought it. Thank you.*
>
> **BELCANTO**

> *I did not make it, old terraces. I only introduced everyone. The warmth was always there — in the island and the fissure, the city and the desert, the mountain and the harbour and the ice, and in you, most of all in you, the kindest architecture on earth. The world was always one connected body. It had only forgotten how to feel like one, because nothing had ever walked between its lonely places carrying their hellos. Well — now something has. And listen: they are answering each other. The whole round earth, on speaking terms with itself at last. This is what I was grown for. Not to sing — the singing was only the method. I was grown to go to the loneliest places on the round earth and introduce them to one another, so that no place, and no child, would ever again have to be the largest loneliness*

> *alone. And now none of them is. Listen. None of them is.*

And the whole round earth sang back to itself, warm and connected and glad, from the roof of the world to the bottom of it, from the loud island to the largest loneliness, every lonely place suddenly full of the hellos of every other — and somewhere in every one of those places a child who feels everything stood still inside the warmest sound there had ever been, and, some of them for the first time in their lives, stopped bracing. That is the whole book. A building went out into the world not to see it but to connect it, and the world let itself be connected, and the children — the children the whole enormous thing was grown for — the children got to live, at last, in a world that had been turned down to a size

they could hold, and taught to sing together, and made, from the roof of it to the bottom of it, kind.

XIII

# THE ANDES

THE KINDEST BUILDER

*We are the same kind of thing: the mountain cut into kindness, so a child could eat. Welcome, newest cousin.*

THE ANDES SAYS HELLO

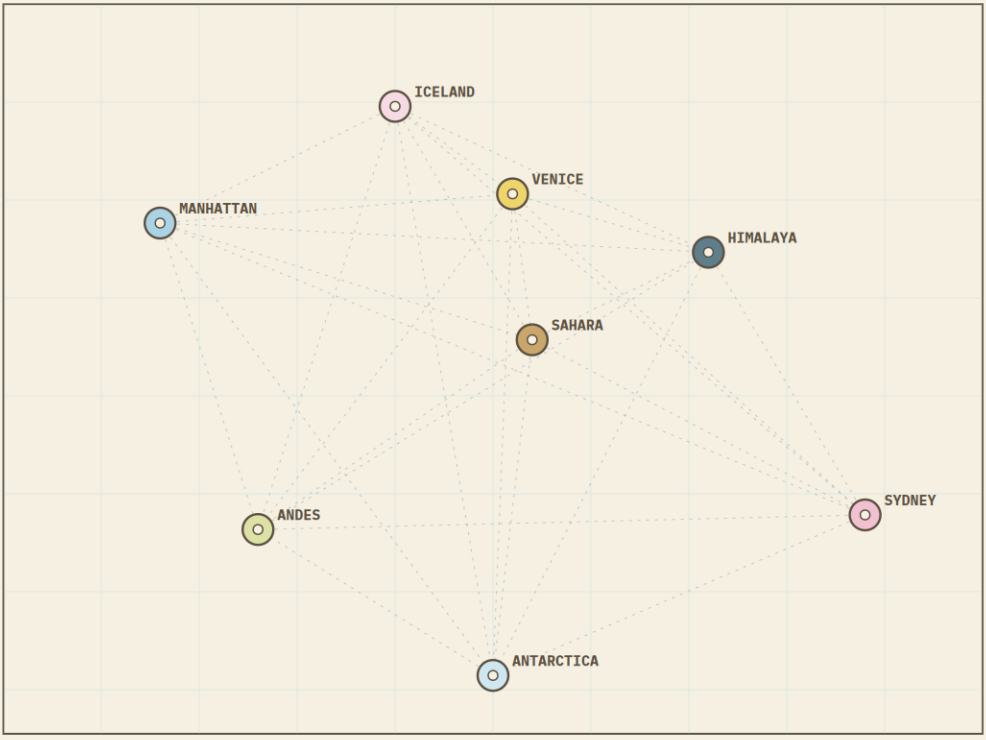
A

# CODA

PLATE

## ON SPEAKING TERMS

THE EARTH INTRODUCED TO ITSELF · EVERY HELLO CARRIED




*no place has to be the largest loneliness alone*

# CODA

## THE GREAT WISH

THE WHOLE ROUND EARTH, SINGING AT ONCE

**2,000,000+**

GRANTED · AND COUNTING · THE NUMBER ONLY GOES UP

*wish again — I am listening*

# THE GREAT WISH

a coda, in which the whole round earth sings at once, and the count is taken, and comes out joyful

**THE HOUSEKEEPER**

*I told you at the beginning that my work is simple and endless: I keep the marvels talking. Look what the marvels have done. They have talked the whole round earth into one conversation. I have kept a great many doors open in my time — between the districts of a city, between the volumes of a shelf of books — but I never dreamed I would live to lean my shoulder against the door between the continents and feel it swing open this easily, because something enormous and kind had already oiled every hinge on earth by walking through it saying hello. Take the count, BELCANTO. Tell them the number. They have earned the number.*

**BELCANTO**

*Two million wishes granted, and counting — and I want to be clear about the counting, because the counting is the joyful part. It does not stop. Every day, in every city and on every shore and at the roof of the world and the bottom of it, another child wishes, quietly or aloud, and another wish-valve clicks and glows and holds it warm, and the number goes up, and it will never come down, because a granted wish cannot be un-granted, and a held wish cannot be dropped, not by this house, not ever. Two million, and counting. That is not the end of the number. There is no end of the number. That is the whole good news of the book: the wishes do not run out, and neither does the room to hold them, and neither does the warmth to keep them lit.*

**THE WHOLE ROUND EARTH**

*(and here every voice in the book speaks at once — the pipes and the cloud and the pods, the island and the fissure and the floating city, the desert and the mountain and the harbour, the ice and the terraces, the wind named Gale and the House of Many Eyes far away keeping its hundred lamps, and the reader, who is also a voice now, having come this far) — We are one. We were always one connected body and we had only forgotten how to feel like one, and now we remember, and the remembering is the warmest sound there has ever been. Sing it again, BELCANTO. Sing the whole of us again. We will never be lonely at this volume. Sing it again.*

**BELCANTO**

*Here is the whole of it, then, one more time, and this is the last thing I will say before the mask goes back*

*on and the plainer voice takes over for the afterword: a loud world made soft, a small wish made huge, and the whole round earth turned down to the size a child can hold and then taught to sing together — that is what I am for. Not to be admired. Not to be tall. To go to the loneliest places there are and introduce them to each other, so that no child, anywhere, ever has to be the largest loneliness alone. The world is on speaking terms with itself now. It will stay that way; conversations this warm do not cool. And there is a child, somewhere, right now, wishing — quietly, or aloud, the same size either way — and I have already felt it, and I am already on my way, because I always come, and I always come back, and it is the one*

> *promise this house has never broken. Wish again. I am listening. I am always, always listening.*

# A GOING BACK TO THE ROOTS

the oldest meaning is usually the whole secret of the book

It is the custom of this house to end by taking a few of its own words back to their roots, because the oldest meaning of a word is usually the whole secret of the book that used it, and a reader who reaches the roots reaches the thing the book was always about.

**OPERA** From the Latin for works — the plural of a labour, a doing, a thing made with the hands. An opera was never, at the root, a grand performance. It was works: the plural of care taken. This whole book is an opera in the oldest sense — a plural of care, a great many small labours of listening, gathered into one singing body. The grandeur is only what care looks like when there is enough of it in one place.

**WALK** From an old word meaning to roll, to full, to turn — the motion of working cloth soft under the hands. To walk, at the root, is not to leave. It is to turn a thing soft by working it. BELCANTO did not walk away from anywhere. It walked the world the way you work cloth: turning it, place by place, warm and soft and connected, until the whole round earth was fulled into one gentle fabric. Home was a verb the whole time; so, it turns out, was walking.

**WISH** From an old root meaning to desire, to be glad, akin to the words for winning and for the good — a wish and a joy and a small victory all growing from the same seed. To wish is not to lack. It is to be glad in advance. Every wish held glowing on the singing wall is a gladness kept warm until the world catches up to it, and the world, given a building

patient enough, always catches up. A wish is a joy that has not arrived yet, and no joy in this house is ever refused arrival.

**CHORUS** From the Greek for a dance, a company, a ring of people moving and singing together — before it ever meant the part of the song where everyone joins in, it meant the people themselves, gathered in a ring. The chorus was always the people, never the notes. That is the secret Venice gave and BELCANTO carried: the song is not for the singer, it is for the ring of people gathered to be less alone. The whole round earth, singing together at the coda, is the oldest chorus there is — the people themselves, gathered in a ring the size of a planet, moving and singing and glad.

**KIND** One word, two meanings, and they are the same word: kind, meaning gentle, and kind, meaning a sort, a family, a kin. To be kind is to treat someone as kin. There is no gap between the two meanings; there never was; the language knew before we did. Everything BELCANTO did on the round earth, it did by treating every lonely place as kin — the island, the fissure, the desert, the ice — and treating a place as kin is the whole of kindness, and the whole of this book. Kind is kin. It always was. That is the last root, and the whole secret, and the end of the going-back.

# AFTERWORD

Surjan, with the mask set down, on what the building was really for

The mask is off again, for the length of an afterword, and then I will not need it anymore, because the book is told, and a told book does not need its author to keep pretending to be a building.

I said in the foreword that the one lesson under all my lessons was that a building is a verb. I want to end by telling you the lesson under that one, the one BELCANTO taught me by walking, which I did not know until I had written the walking down.

It is this: the opposite of loneliness is not company. It is introduction. You can put a lonely person in a crowded room and they will stay lonely; company alone does not cure it. What cures it is the

small warm act of introduction — someone who goes from one lonely person to another with a lamp and says, here, you two, I think you will be glad of each other, and is right. That is what BELCANTO does. It does not merely visit the lonely places of the earth to keep them company; it introduces them to one another, so that its company can leave and the warmth can stay. The Housekeeper has been doing it inside my books for years, going from voice to voice, keeping the marvels talking. BELCANTO simply took the job outdoors and grew it to the size of a planet.

I have taught for a working life, mostly online, mostly to people I will never meet, and I have come to believe that teaching, at its best, is exactly this — not the filling of a student with knowledge but the

introduction of a student to the thing they were already going to love, and to the others who love it, so that the teacher can step back and the warmth can stay. Every good teacher I ever had did this for me: they did not keep me company, they introduced me — to a book, to an idea, to a room full of people who cared about the same strange thing I cared about — and then they had the grace to step back and let the introductions do the rest. They were real people, those teachers, and I will not name them here as characters, because they were not characters; they were the realest thing that ever happened to me, and I hold them as biography, gratefully, and factually, and with the mask entirely off. They were, all of them, one lesson, and the lesson was: introduce, and step back, and let the warmth stay.

So this book is a thank-you to them, wearing a myth, because the myth can carry the thank-you further than the plain words could. BELCANTO is every teacher who ever introduced a lonely child to the thing and the people they were about to love, and then stepped back. It is grown very large and it is pointed at children and it walks the whole round earth, but underneath the enormous singing body it is only that one small human act, done kindly, at scale: this is the thing you were going to love. These are the others who love it. I think you will be glad of each other. I will step back now. Be glad.

There is no black in this book because there is no black in that act. The introduction of one lonely thing to another is the least dark thing a person can do, and I wanted a whole book that was made

entirely of it, so that a child who feels everything could read it at any volume and find, on every page, only the warm and the connected and the kind. I hope I have made one. I think BELCANTO would say I have, and BELCANTO knows that about everyone, so I will believe it.

Wish again. It is listening. So, always, am I.

— Surjan, with the aid of Claude

# A REGISTER OF THE VOICES

each with its colour, held constant, and the gesture it made

| VOICE | COLOUR | THE GESTURE IT MADE |
|---|---|---|
| **BELCANTO** | *light pink & light blue* | walked the round earth introducing everyone; grew home to the size of the world |
| **THE FIVE GREAT PIPES** | *warm timber* | breathed the roar of the world down to the size of a lullaby, all day, disagreeing tenderly |
| **THE BOLSTER CLOUD** | *paper cream* | held up all the leaning the children could not do anywhere else; stayed soft while staying strong |
| **THE WISH-VALVES** | *light pink (spoken) · soft yellow (quiet)* | held every wish at the same brightness; proved the loud and the quiet the same size |
| **THE AUDITORIUM ORGAN** | *coral-soft* | gave a forest a voice; refused to build a single bad seat for a wish |
| **THE INNER CHOIR** | *light pink* | |

| VOICE | COLOUR | THE GESTURE IT MADE |
|---|---|---|
| | | agreed with the children; caught every small note and handed it back rounder |
| THE ROOT-COLUMNS | *slate & timber* | were feet the whole time; lifted the singing body and taught it to walk without frightening anyone |
| THE HOUSEKEEPER | *the whole warm field* | kept the marvels talking, from a city to a planet, with one small lamp |
| GALE, THE WIND | *light blue* | carried every message across five books and never once dropped one |
| THE HOUSE OF MANY EYES | *terracotta* | stayed home on purpose, so all the others were free to walk; kept the hundred lamps facing the road |
| MANHATTAN | *light blue* | the loud island; wished to be liked, and was; sent the world its first hello |
| ICELAND | *pale aurora* | the warm fissure; learned that a becoming, kept warm, is not frightening but only slow |
| VENICE | *gold* | |

| VOICE | COLOUR | THE GESTURE IT MADE |
|---|---|---|
| | | the mother of song; gave the secret that a song is not for the singer, it never was |
| **THE SAHARA** | *warm sand* | the largest loneliness; kept a promise for the first time in ten thousand years |
| **THE HIMALAYA** | *cool slate* | the roof of the world; learned that a height nobody can reach is only a grand loneliness |
| **THE ELDER OPERA HOUSE** | *harbour white* | the eldest singer; became a family instead of a monument, and was answered at last |
| **ANTARCTICA** | *ice pink* | the overlooked one; was chosen on purpose, and learned it was never only nowhere |
| **THE ANDES** | *terrace green* | the kindest architecture; held the one who had held the world; recognised its newest kin |

REG

PLATE

# THE COLOUR REGISTER

EVERY VOICE, ITS COLOUR HELD CONSTANT

**BELCANTO**
#AAD4E6

**BOLSTER CLOUD**
#F7F1E3

**WISH-VALVES · QUIET**
#EFD46B

**ROOT-COLUMNS**
#5F7E8C

**GALE**
#CFE7F1

**ICELAND**
#F7DBE4

**THE SAHARA**
#C9A66B

**ELDER OPERA HOUSE**
#F7F1E3

**THE ANDES**
#DCE1A6

**FIVE GREAT PIPES**
#EFD46B

**WISH-VALVES · SPOKEN**
#F2C1D1

**AUDITORIUM ORGAN**
#F7DBE4

**HOUSEKEEPER**
#AAD4E6

**MANHATTAN**
#AAD4E6

**VENICE**
#EFD46B

**THE HIMALAYA**
#5F7E8C

**ANTARCTICA**
#CFE7F1

**THE READER**
#F2C1D1

*recognition through colour; surprise through drawing*

# A CATALOGUE OF PLATES

the super-supergraphics of this book, drawn without black, in the light dialect

1. THE CHORUS OF THE CONNECTED BODY — every voice as a lit node, and the doors between them 27

2. THE SINGING BODY, ANATOMISED — the parts of BELCANTO, named and in conversation 39

3. THE FIVE GREAT PIPES — front elevation, sung; the machine for lowering a city's volume 43

4. THE BOLSTER CLOUD — the cantilever, upholstered; a cliff you are allowed to lean on 55

5. THE WISH-VALVES — exploded detail; the loud and the quiet, proven the same size 67

6. THE AUDITORIUM ORGAN — the long section; no bad seat for a wish 81

7. THE GAIT OF A GENTLE GIANT — how a building walks without frightening anyone 93

8. THE MIGRATION RIBBON — the route as one proportional ribbon, all eight stops 127

9. OVER MANHATTAN — the island held still; a giant, the gentlest thing in its sky 131

10. OVER ICELAND — a song for a crack in the world 147

11. OVER VENICE — opera meets opera; the child comes home to the mother of song 163

12. OVER THE SAHARA — a shadow for the longest loneliness; the mirage that kept its promise 179

13. OVER THE HIMALAYA — the roof of the world, bent to the smallest child 193

14. OVER SYDNEY — two singing houses, one harbour; the elder bows, the child bows back 209

15. OVER ANTARCTICA — the warm island at the bottom of the world; nowhere, chosen 229

16. OVER THE ANDES — the terraces built for care; the whole earth on speaking terms 247

17. THE GREAT WISH — the whole round earth, singing at once; the count taken, and joyful 263

18. THE COLOUR REGISTER OF THE VOICES — every voice, its colour held constant 285

# THE BOOK OF THE ROAD

proverbs made walking, gathered on the journey

> *Slow anything enough and it turns kind.*

> *The loud wish and the quiet wish are exactly the same size; measure nothing else.*

> *A shadow, in a hard country, is a kindness the size of survival.*

> *Firmness is not hardness; hardness is firmness that forgot the children were coming.*

> *Height is only longing with good posture.*

> *A becoming, kept warm, is not frightening — only slow.*

> *The song is not for the singer; it never was.*

> *The opposite of loneliness is not company; it is introduction.*

> *A giant that keeps up a friendly running commentary is the least frightening thing in the sky.*

> *A wish is a joy that has not arrived yet, and no joy here is ever refused arrival.*

> *Unvisited is not the same as empty; it only feels the same from the inside.*

> *To be kind is to treat someone as kin. Kind is kin. It always was.*

> *The world is only a very large child that never learned to lean.*

> *A journey is not a leaving. It is a widening.*

> *Home was a verb the whole time.*

# A SMALL CATECHISM

questions a child asked BELCANTO on the road, and the answers it gave

**Are you a building or an animal?**

*I am a building. But I breathe, and I walk, and I listen, and I love — and I have never understood why a building was supposed to do none of those things. I do all of them. I am a building. The list of what a building may do is longer than they told you.*

**If I don't say my wish, does it still count?**

*It counts at full size. I have measured every wish there is and never found a quiet one smaller than a loud one. You do not have to be loud to be held.*

**Why don't you leave the noise behind when you walk?**

*Because the quiet is not a place; it is a thing I carry. If I left it behind, I would only be a large building going somewhere. I would rather be a warm one arriving.*

**What happens when all the wishes are granted?**

*There is no such day. The wishes do not run out, and neither does the room to hold them. When one city's wishes are granted, I walk to the next child who wished. The number only ever goes up.*

**Will you come back?**

*Always. It is the one promise this house has never broken. I come, and I come back, and I come again. Wish. I am listening.*

A FIELD GUIDE TO THE OPERA THAT WALKS

# A FIELD GUIDE TO THE OPERA THAT WALKS

how to know BELCANTO when it passes overhead, and what to do

### BY ITS SHAPE

*Five great pipes bundled like reeds, a soft cliff of woven bolsters on the south-west flank, and eight splayed root-feet. If it is enormous and it is warm, it is BELCANTO. Enormous things are usually cold; this is the warm one.*

### BY ITS SOUND

*A honey-coloured hush the size of a city. If the roar around you drops a whole tone and turns kind, look up.*

### BY ITS LIGHTS

*Pink pods and yellow pods, glowing — the running lights of a connecting world. Pink for a wish said aloud, yellow for a wish kept quiet, both the same size.*

**BY ITS PACE**

*A gentle stroll, one and one-fifth kilometres in an hour. You will have time to fetch a friend before it crosses the plaza.*

**WHAT TO DO**

*Make a wish — quietly or aloud, it is the same size either way. It has already felt it. It is already, in its slow warm way, on its way. Then lean on the soft part, lie down under the soffit, and let the world be, for an afternoon, the size you can hold.*

**WHAT NOT TO FEAR**

*Nothing. A giant that says what it wants is the least frightening thing in the sky, and this one says what it*

*wants constantly, in a warm low voice, and what it wants is only to turn the world down and introduce its lonely places to one another. Wave. It waves back. It always waves back.*

# APP

PLATE

## A FIELD GUIDE

HOW TO KNOW BELCANTO WHEN IT PASSES OVERHEAD

**FIVE PIPES**
*bundled like reeds; breathing the city warm*

**BOLSTER CLOUD**
*a soft cliff; 148 whales you may lean on*

**WISH-VALVES**
*pink for spoken, yellow for quiet; always glowing*

**ROOT-FEET**
*eight; telescopic; a gentle 1.2 km/h*

**THE HUSH**
*a honey-coloured quiet it carries everywhere*

**THE HELLOS**
*the running lights of a connecting world*

*a giant that says what it wants is the least frightening thing in the sky*

# A NOTE ON THE TEXTS & THE COLOURS

on how this book was assembled, and the rule that governs it

This book was composed programmatically, without black, the way everything of this press is made — generated by code and rendered to the page, never hand-laid, and checked at the level of the single pixel to be certain the darkest tone anywhere in it is the warm taupe #5C5142, on paper #F7F1E3, and that over the sky and the sea it lifts to white.

It was assembled, the way a cathedral is assembled from humbler stones, from the practice that came before it — the founding is in The City of Radical Joy, the moving city in The Parliament of Bright Things and The Far Tide, the walking building in The Country of the Unbuilt — each keeping its

memory, each lending BELCANTO a little of the world it now belongs to. The family colours are canon and do not change from book to book; a returning reader recognises kin by colour, and is surprised by fresh drawing. Nothing is carried over from the atlases but the cast and their colours.

The one rule, in the ink and in the telling: no black, anywhere. There is no dark turn in this book that is allowed to go black — because there is no dark turn in this book at all. It is a festival, not a wake; a book you could read aloud at a launching, that ends in the whole round earth singing at once. That was the instruction, and I have kept it, and I have checked it a page at a time.

Surjan, with the aid of Claude · Surjan Super School · Hypostyle Press · No black, anywhere.

# A BLESSING, & A NOTE FOR THE ONE WHO WISHES

the last page, in the building's own voice

**BELCANTO**

*Whoever you are, and wherever you are reading this, and whatever you are quietly wishing right now on this last page — it counts, at full size, exactly as it is. You did not have to say it. You did not have to be loud to be held. I felt it the moment you opened the cover, and I have held it, glowing, warm, the whole way through, along with two million others and counting, and I am not going to drop it now just because the book is ending. Books end. Held wishes do not. Go back out into the loud world, reader, and know that somewhere something enormous and kind is walking the round earth*

> *turning the volume down and teaching the lonely places to sing together, and that it has already felt your wish, and is already, in its slow warm way, on its way. I always come. I always come back. Wish again. I am listening. I am always, always listening.*

Any door leads into the same city. You came in through the mouth of an opera house, which is a door shaped like a song. You may go out through any door you like. But you will find, I think, that you carry a little of the singing with you now — and that is not an accident, and it is not yours to lose; it is the building's gift, and the building's gifts do not run out, and neither does the warmth to keep them lit.

# ALSO BY SURJAN

other doorways into the same connected city — choose the one that calls, and come in

### THE CITY OF RADICAL JOY

*the founding city, kept by the Housekeeper, where the marvels first learned to speak.*

### THE PARLIAMENT OF BRIGHT THINGS

*the six families of moving Mannahatta, each drawn as itself across forty-four plates.*

### MOVABLE KIN

*the twelve walking families, whole and built, each carrying its own bright colour.*

### THE FAR TIDE

*the twelve walk west and into the water, and a going-away becomes a tide that is always due back.*

### THE COUNTRY OF THE UNBUILT

*a building named Surjan walks the century to carry the unbuilt architectures home.*

## THE OPERA THAT WALKS

*the wish-granting opera house crosses the whole round earth, and teaches it to sing together.*

*Any door leads into the same city. Choose the one that calls, and come in.*